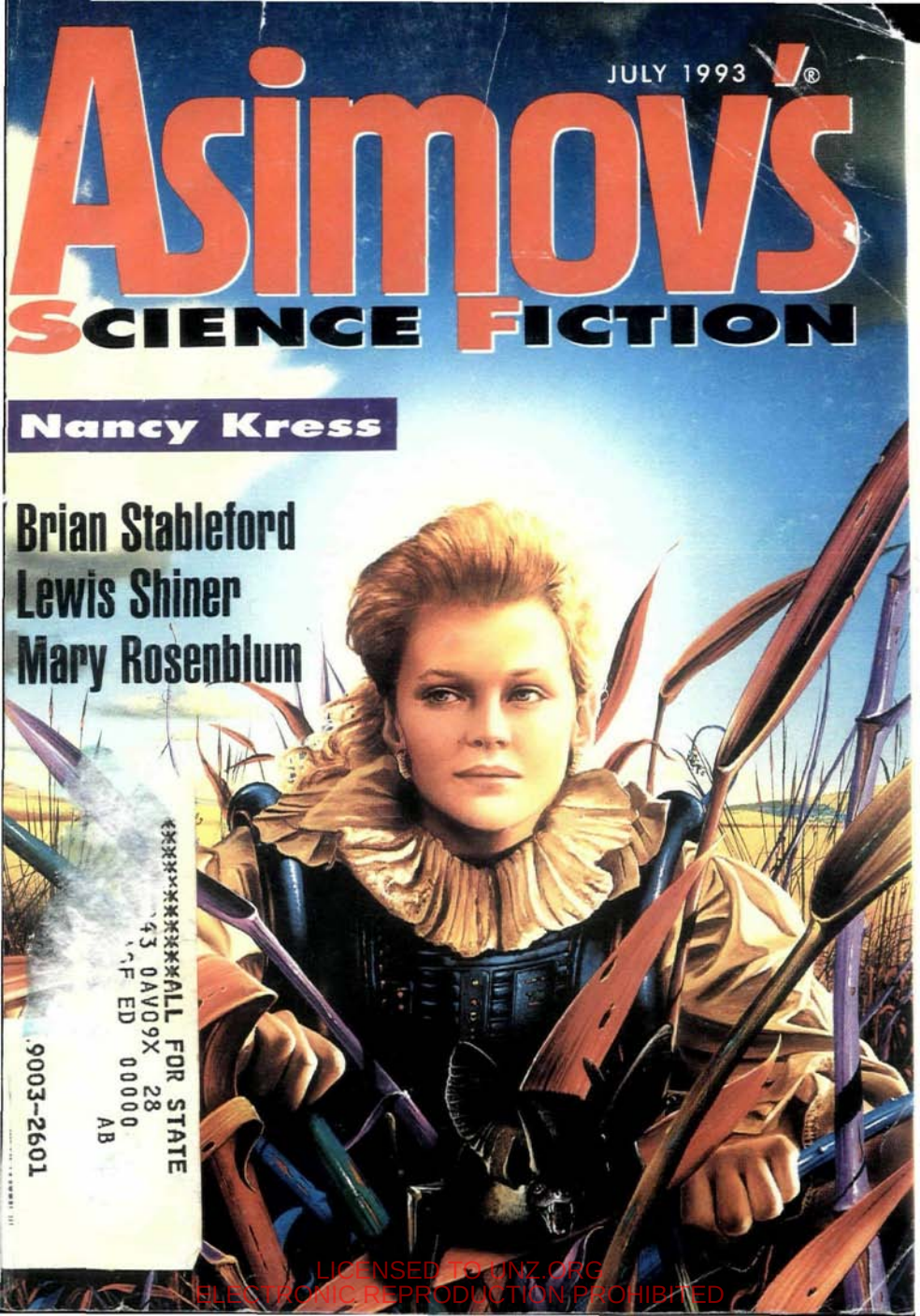

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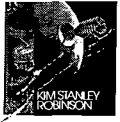

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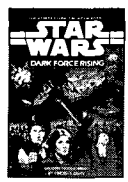

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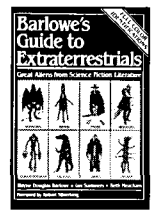

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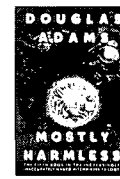

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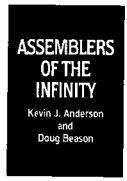

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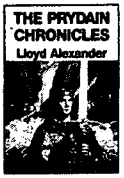

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July 1993
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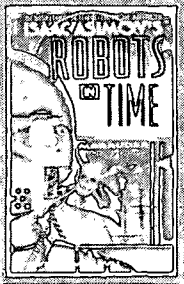

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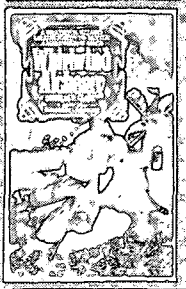

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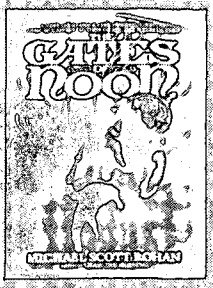

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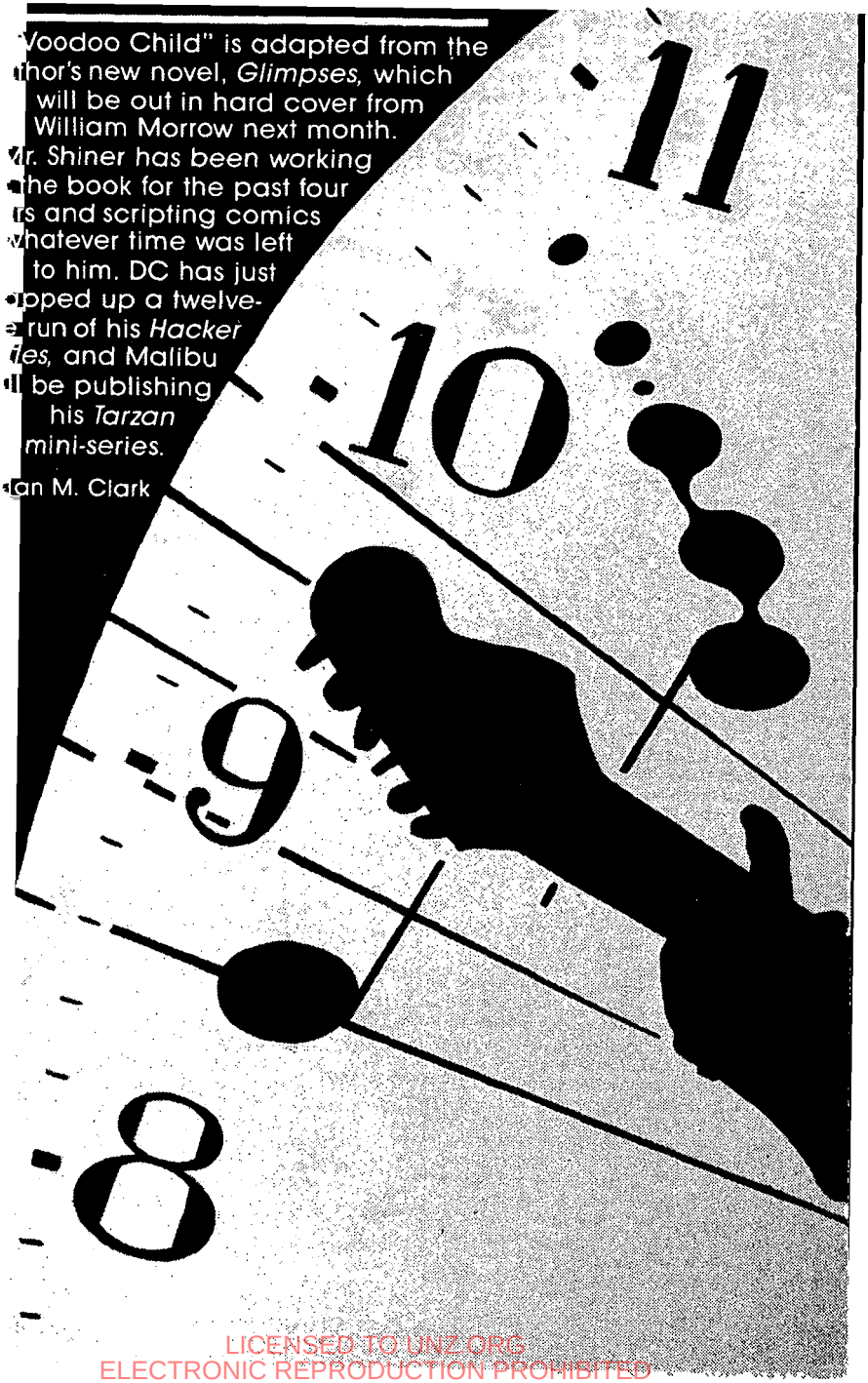
Voodoo Child" is adapted from the thor's new novel, *Glimpses*, which will be out in hard cover from William Morrow next month. Mr. Shiner has been working the book for the past four rs and scripting comics whatever time was left to him. DC has just opped up a twelve-e run of his *Hacker ies*, and Malibu l be publishing his *Tarzan* mini-series.

an M. Clark



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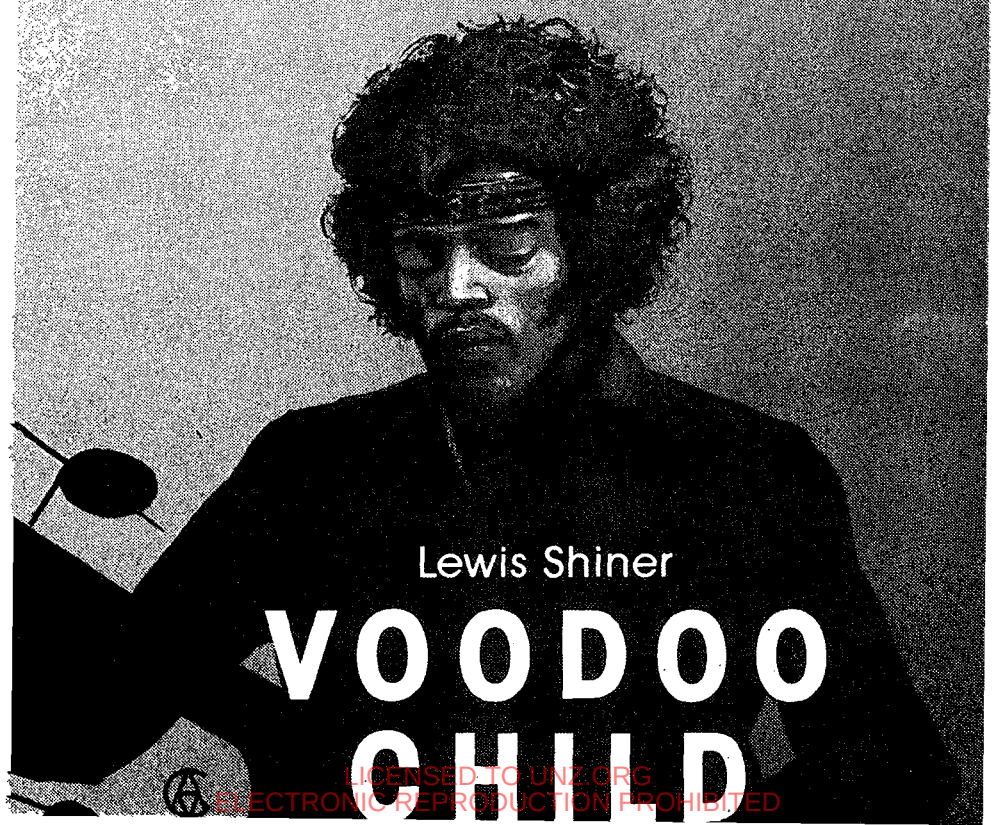
I was there.

I crossed Margaret Street in the last of the daylight and walked down the stairs at number 48. Inside the double doors everything was the way I'd pictured it, except maybe a little smaller and older, the way everything in London is smaller and older than in the States. The ceiling was low and stained and there was an odd heart-shaped pattern to the wallpaper. Above the booths on one wall was a framed poster of a 1920's vintage nude woman.

Near the stage several of the little three-foot-square tables had been pushed together, but nobody was sitting there. The booths were full and a few of the other tables too, everyone talking, the men all with thick sideburns, their hair parted low and combed straight across their foreheads, the women with long straight hair parted in the middle. Everyone had flared trousers and squared-off shoes, and they were all smoking. Nobody paid any attention to the guy with the acoustic guitar on stage, who I thought might be Long John Baldry.



Lewis Shiner

VOODOO CHILD

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Outside the Speakeasy, things were going to hell in England just like they were in the States. The underground paper *OZ* had just been busted for obscenity, investors had figured out there was real money to be made everywhere from rock shows at the Roundhouse to clothing stores on Carnaby Street, the cops had hounded Brian Jones into alcoholism and death, the Isle of Wight festival the week before was inundated by half a million kids, driven by a desperate longing to be part of the scene, part of the moment, to at least brush against it or maybe rip a tiny piece of it loose before it was gone.

I'd had twenty years to think about it. I didn't think things had to be that way. I believed the right person could change them, could turn them around, and I believed that person was Jimi Hendrix. Unless history repeated itself and, a few days from now, Jimi would strangle to death again in his own vomit after taking too many pills to try and sleep.

I found a table in a dark corner and ordered a beer when the waitress came by. I couldn't see Jimi anywhere but my nerves were buzzing and I felt lucky. The Speakeasy was an epicenter for the explosion of Swinging London, even in 1970, even now that the shock waves were dying out.

I took a longer look around and this time I hesitated at a tall, graceful woman with long red hair who sat in a booth by the stage. I knew her from somewhere. The guy she was with had black wavy hair past his collar, bangs, and sunglasses. He wore a black shirt and striped tie and white pointed shoes, like a gangster. He seemed to be arguing with her. When the couple in the next booth left, I took over their empty table.

". . . killing yourself, Erika," the man said. "I love you and I'm not going to help."

Christ, I thought. It's Erika Hanover.

"It's my life," Erika said, "and it's not worth a damn to me right now." Her voice was low and husky, her accent strictly British upper class, no trace of the continent left. "For God's sake, Tony. Please."

"No," the man said, and stood up. I glanced over and saw him kiss the top of her head. "I have to get back to the tour. Mick is bonking some beauty queen from Texas and I've got to get him to Paris for the Olympia on Sunday. It's going to be a madhouse."

"If you loved me. . . "

"I do love you. And that's why I'm not going to be an accomplice to this." He let out a long sigh. "Take care of yourself. Please. Get some help." He passed my table, headed for the door.

I sat for a while and listened to Erika cry. I thought about Jimi, and about lost opportunities. Then I moved to the seat across from her.

"Go away," she said. She had her face in her hands and didn't even look at me.

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"I don't want anything from you. I just want to help."

Now she did look at me. "Are you holding?" I hadn't heard the expression in so long it confused me for a second. "Have you got any drugs?" she said.

"No." She was recognizable as Erika Hanover: high forehead and brilliant dark red hair, penetrating gray eyes. Tonight her broad face was puffy and her eyes had dark circles underneath. She would be close to forty at this point, at the height of her notoriety. She was almost as tall as me, languid and sensual, full-bodied but not heavy. She wore jeans, a white T-shirt, and a denim jacket. There were streaks of grime on the shirt.

"Then you can't help me and you should please go away."

After a long minute I said, "I really admire your work."

"You can't possibly know me."

"There's a picture of Mick Jagger at Hyde Park, at the free concert that was supposed to be a memorial for Brian Jones. He's covered with dozens of dying butterflies." She nodded slowly, as if it was somebody else's work. "John Lennon, with Yoko reflected in his round mirrored sunglasses, she's in black, he's in white. Hendrix, with this half-eaten meal and a cigarette. . . "

"You surprise me. Most people never look to see who took the picture."

"If I like something, I want to know who's responsible."

"What's your name?"

"Ray."

"I'm Erika." She held out her hand, palm down, and I gave it a gentle squeeze. "Where in America are you from, Ray?"

"Texas. Austin."

"I've been to Austin. It was lovely. Would you be a love and get me a drink? Anything, I don't really care."

At the bar I ordered her a rum and Coke. When I took the drink back to the booth I half-expected her to be gone. Instead she'd calmed down and lit a cigarette. Baldry finished his set to a quick flurry of applause as I sat down. Erika left the drink by her right hand, untouched.

An unseen DJ put Pink Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother* over the PA. I leaned forward and said, "Look, I couldn't help overhearing earlier. What was that guy saying about you trying to kill yourself?"

Her eyes were really very beautiful, alert and intense, despite the strain they showed. "I don't wish to be rude, but why should you care?"

"I do care. I care about your pictures, and. . . I just care, that's all."

"But you don't know me. I'm not a very nice person."

"Why not let me decide that?"

"I'm looking for heroin, Ray. Junkies are seldom nice people. I was hoping to score from Tony, and failing that, I thought perhaps Marianne

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might be here." Tony, I realized, must have been Spanish Tony, Tony Sanchez, purveyor of drugs to the Stones and Marianne Faithfull's sometime lover.

"Marianne Faithfull," I said.

"Yes, Ray. She's a junkie too. And a friend. It's very liberating, in a way, heroin is. You're just one more junkie. No one cares if you're a pop star or a photographer or on the dole. We're all the same." She stubbed out her cigarette and, in a swift movement, drank off the rum and Coke. "Do you think we could get out of here?"

"I. . . I don't know," I said.

"You were waiting for someone, weren't you?"

"No, I mean. . . I was hoping to see Jimi Hendrix. I know he comes here to jam."

"Not tonight, love, not that I've heard of. Do you know Jimi?"

"I've never met him. I just. . . feel like I know him."

"Yes, he affects people that way, doesn't he? He's a wonderful man. A true gentleman in the old-fashioned sense of the word. And a fantastic fuck, of course."

I suddenly remembered an interview I'd read. They asked her if she ever slept with any of her glamorous subjects and she replied, "Most of them, actually." I found that suddenly intimidating.

She looked at me expectantly, with heavy-lidded eyes. I held up my hands. "I guess I don't really have any plans, then." Erika was part of the London inner circle, the hundred or so people who went to the same parties and took the same drugs, set trends and made headlines, joined each others' bands and fell in and out of each others' beds. If she couldn't get me to Hendrix, no one could.

I caught up to her and let one hand rest in the small of her back, feeling her heat through the jacket. She smiled at me, amused, I think, that I'd ended up wanting her just like everyone else. As we came out onto Margaret Street I tried to remember what lay in her future. I didn't know if she'd died at the end of the sixties or simply faded into obscurity. It was an eerie feeling.

"Do you have someplace?" she asked.

I wanted to tell her that I was out of my league, playing way over my head. She had to already know that. "I just got here, I don't even have a hotel yet."

"Yes, well. I'm afraid I'm of no fixed abode myself at the moment." She lifted her hand and a cab squealed to a stop. "I need to run one errand," she said as we got in, "then we can find you a hotel." To the driver she said, "Bag O'Nails, please, on Kingly Street."

The streets of London looked like they'd been hand-painted in psychedelic colors. There were posters on the walls, exotic clothes, fresh paint

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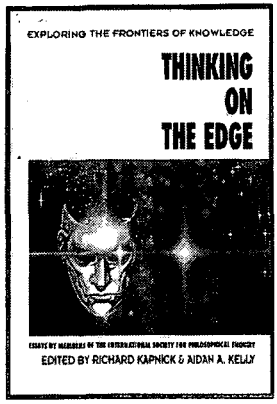

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on new businesses. The ragged spirit of underground culture had turned into the hard gloss of commercial enterprise, but it was exciting just the same. It was like a big-budget Hollywood movie, with lots of flash and glitter to keep you from noticing the lack of soul.

As the cab pulled up outside the Bag O'Nails Erika said, "You couldn't lend a girl a fiver, could you?" I peeled off a five-pound note and she kissed me, unexpectedly, on the cheek. "Wait here," she said, "I'll be right back." She walked slowly, not quite steadily, to the door of the club.

The cabbie caught my eye in the mirror and grinned. "Nice night, eh, gov'nor?"

I nodded and looked away. He didn't have to recognize Erika specifically to know she was special. She was what everybody else aspired to, and it showed in the way she dressed and talked and moved. I didn't think she'd be back. It was only a question of how long I was obligated to wait for her.

"What time is it?" I asked the driver.

"Half eleven, sir."

I reset my watch. Almost midnight, and people thronged the sidewalks. Street vendors sold everything from homemade clothes and jewelry to underground papers like *IT* and *Frendz*. Tourists and older Londoners stared at the parade of finery. If Jimi and Erika were the royalty, the kids were their subjects, brightly dressed, hung with chains and medallions, eyes darting nervously ahead, voices slightly too loud, too high-pitched.

There was a rattle at the door and Erika climbed in next to me, smiling. "Everything is now wonderful," she said.

Erika waited discreetly in the lobby while I checked in. I wanted to put Erika's name next to mine on the registration card to make it seem more real. It was only when I handed the card back that the date on it hit home: 15/9/70. I had only Wednesday and Thursday to make contact with Jimi and get my message across. Then I turned and saw Erika and knew I'd have to risk it.

By the time we got to our floor, Erika was chewing her lower lip and rubbing at her cuticles. She left one newly lighted cigarette burning in the ashtray in the lift while she lit another. As soon as I got the door open she pushed ahead of me and shut herself in the bathroom.

There was a bed, a chest, a desk, and a bentwood chair. I pulled the bedspread down and stacked the pillows against the headboard. I kicked off my shoes and lay down, knowing Erika was using my bathroom to shoot up. She was famous and powerful and spoiled, and there was nothing I could do to stop her.

On the other hand, I was also pretty sure that my cooperation was

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going to be rewarded with her body. I tried to remember the last time a woman had touched me with kindness in her hands. I felt withered and dry.

After a while I heard the bath run. She was in there for a long time, and took a long time to dry off afterward. My mind veered back and forth between thoughts of her damp nakedness and wondering what she thought of me, expected of me.

She came out with her hair wrapped in one towel and her body in another. The towel around her body left cleavage at the top and impossibly long thighs at the bottom. She wobbled slightly as she walked. She lay down next to me and kissed me lightly on the lips. Her eyelids seemed too heavy to stay open on their own.

She rested her head lightly on my chest and said, "Thank you. I'd been without a decent bath for a while." Her voice was both sleepy and coy. "I don't know how I could ever repay you." She rolled slightly away from me, onto her back, and somehow the towel around her body came undone. I was acutely conscious of the overhead light, the brightness of the room. I could see one breast, large and soft, the skin white as milk. I turned her face toward me and kissed her, to see what it would be like. Her mouth was soft and she kissed me with impersonal intensity. It felt good, sensual and sweet, and at the same time I was disconnected from it. I was concerned about how narrow the bed was, whether she could actually feel any sexual desire behind the heroin, that this was Erika Hanover, for Christ's sake, of the royal Hanover line, who had slept with Hendrix and Jagger and god knew who else. And that I was here in bed with her when I should have been trying to find Jimi.

She pulled the towel loose from her hair. I pushed the other towel aside as well and kissed her nipples while she ran her hands lazily through my hair. "Mmmmmm," she said. "That's lovely."

I took my clothes off and lay down again. I was still not erect. I kissed her some more and ran my hands over the soft, warm skin of her body but it didn't help. She touched me and saw the situation and tried to massage some life into me. "Is everything all right?" she asked after a while.

"I don't know," I said. "It feels wonderful. It's just not, I don't know. Not happening."

She touched my cheek. "Was it something I did? Is there something you want me to do?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then don't worry about it," she said. "I'm pretty stoned anyway. Can you turn out the light?"

I got up to turn out the light. I couldn't believe it. I'd actually wound up in bed with Erika Hanover, one of the most desired women of the

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decade, and I couldn't get it up. I grabbed the useless piece of meat between my legs and choked it. Bastard, I thought. Useless bastard.

When I got back in bed I thought at first that Erika had nodded off. Instead, in a very slow, dreamy voice she said, "It's so difficult, the whole sex thing, isn't it? I mean, it's got so it's simply expected. Whether you actually fancy someone or not, one still feels as though one ought to. From gratitude or politeness or perhaps just on principle."

"Do you even want to? I mean, when you're . . ."

"On heroin? Oh yes, it's a very sensual drug, heroin is. Not sexual, perhaps, but sensual. Everything feels so good." In the faint light from the window I watched her stroke the pillow in a slow, rhythmic motion. Her voice seemed to come from nowhere, the words distinct, but soft and very, very slow. "The truth? I don't suppose I really care if I actually pull someone or not. It's so lovely to lie quietly afterward . . ."

She was silent for long enough that I thought once again she'd nodded out. Then she said, "It feels so good. I hate to waste it in sleeping. Do you mind talking?"

"No."

"Are you afraid of death?"

"I don't know. A little, I guess. Why?"

"Heroin is like a little taste of death for me. So peaceful. But men are so afraid of death. It's not like that for women, I don't think. Why should that be?"

"I don't know."

Her sentences had become simple and short, with long pauses in between. "I think maybe life is such a struggle for women. So much blood and pain. Death is a release from all that. Did you know Marianne actually died? In Australia, last year. She was so upset over Mick. She took 150 Tuinol. She had the most amazing vision. She saw Brian there, Brian Jones. He'd only been dead a few days. She told me about it. She was walking along this plain. There was no wind or heat or shade. Just this rocky, vast plain. Like something out of the *Inferno*. Suddenly Brian was there. He was so pleased to see her. He'd been so frightened and lonely. The first thing he asked her for was a Valium.

"They started to walk together, just talking. She knew somehow they were on an adventure. The walk took days. They talked about life and death and God. They took a lot of comfort in each other. And then they came to this vast chasm. Brian said, 'I have to go now. Thanks for coming with me.' And he went over the edge. Marianne says she stood there for years. Then she heard voices, calling her back. She found herself in this place like an airport. It was a place where you wait. And then she said her name must have been called. Because she woke up.

"She'd been unconscious for six days. Can you imagine? It sounds like

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heaven. To sleep like that. When she got out of hospital she went traveling around Australia. All over the country. And she came to this place that was just like the one in her dream. It's called Piggery, in Byron Bay. I wrote down the name. It's along a beach, by the sea. Marianne said it looked like the moon. It was like the place in her dream, but she'd never been there before.

"There's so much we'll never understand, isn't there? So many things we can never explain away. I believe that, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I do."

I shifted around, got more comfortable. I could smell the soap on her skin and I felt the first tentative prickling of renewed desire. "Erika?" I said. She was asleep.

I lay there for a long time, my face hot with shame and frustration. It had happened a few times before, of course. I guess it happens to everyone. There's something inside me that gets confused, that loses track of who this other person is here in bed with me, that is suddenly naked and afraid, that feels her expectations more strongly than desire. Sometimes all I need is to hear the person's voice to feel connected again.

I wanted to wake Erika up and talk to her, or maybe try again. I touched her cheek and saw she was deep into her drugged sleep. Everything was going wrong, Jimi was eluding me even as I lay there.

For just a second, hanging on the edge of sleep, I saw the road I'd been on since my father died. Watching my marriage crumble, feeling overwhelmed with loss, searching for something that wouldn't slip through my fingers. Jimi's lost music becoming an obsession, a need so powerful that it had opened up a hole in time. It was a hole so wide that I'd been unable to keep from falling through it, and the music had brought me here.

I slept badly. I woke up tired and still hating myself at ten in the morning, to find Erika gathering up her clothes. She looked at me oddly so I said, "Ray. I met you at the Speakeasy—"

"Don't be silly. Of course I remember you." I wasn't at all sure that she did. She was wearing panties and nothing else, untangling her T-shirt. She made a face at the way it smelled. I was of course stiff as a baseball bat but I didn't see a chance to make up for the night before.

Erika said, "You told me you wanted to meet Hendrix, but you never said why."

"He's in danger. I can't tell you how I know. If I could talk to him, I could warn him. It's literally life and death."

She sat in the bentwood chair, jeans forgotten in her hands. "What sort of danger? Is this some CIA plot? King and the Kennedys and now Jimi?"

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"No, it's. . . you remember talking about Marianne last night, and you said there are all these things we'll never understand? This is one of them. There's this accident waiting to happen, and I think I can save Jimi from it."

I felt like she wanted to believe me. "You understand that I have to be careful. Jimi is one of God's innocents. He has no discrimination with people, and he's so vulnerable. Right now he's being devoured by all these negative forces around him, negative people. He doesn't need another person who simply wants something from him."

"It's the other way around. I want to help him."

"I seem to remember your saying something like that to me yesterday. It would be nice to think that in some other life you could perhaps help me. You seem a very kind person. I would love to photograph you, but—" She made a vague gesture with her free hand. "I seem to have misplaced all my cameras. Sad, really. I don't even know if I could do it anymore. One needs a certain hunger, and I seem to have misplaced that as well."

"You don't take any pictures at all?"

"I haven't for almost a year. But don't let's go on about me." She pulled her jeans on, suddenly very brisk. "We were talking of Jimi. There's still hope for Jimi, after all." She got into her shoes, picked up her jacket, and stopped by the door. "Every human will hit moments of absolute truth. I would like to think I've done it a time or two, maybe the picture with the butterflies. Jimi is so special because he has trained and refined himself to do this more than anyone I've ever known. There's really nothing else for him, you see, but this struggle to break through the wall, to get to this truth."

She opened the door, then turned back. "Eric Burdon's playing Ronnie Scott's club tonight, in Frith Street. I expect Jimi will be there. Come late, perhaps one or two. If he's there, I'll introduce you."

"Wait. Can't you stay—"

"No, love, I must run." She blew me a kiss from the doorway. "I'll see you tonight."

That afternoon I ended up in Hyde Park. It was a decent autumn afternoon, cool, with the sun breaking through now and again. There were a lot of kids there with long hair and patched jeans and guitars, lying in the grass.

Keep this, I thought, keep the kids and the park and the weather. Lose the guys in the dark suits with the bowlers and umbrellas and red carnations, staring at them with open hatred. Lose the pollution and the cars, keep the trains and the buskers in the tube stops, with their music echoing through the long tiled halls. And keep Jimi. Most of all keep Jimi.

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* * *

I got to Ronnie Scott's club at midnight to see the show. It was a jazz venue, guys in suits and turtlenecks, guys in goatees and berets. The tables were all taken and I had to stand by the bar. I ordered a beer and checked the setup: Lonnie Jordan's Hammond B-3 and the drums and congas and the stacks of amps completely filled the stage. A roadie made a last pass to duct-tape anything that moved, and then the lights went down.

War had been gigging for ten years in San Pedro, now they suddenly had a gold record and a European tour. It didn't matter that frontman Eric Burdon had been in the spotlight forever. They were hot. I saw the excitement and longing and bravado roll off them like sweat.

And tonight there was something extra. A chance to see Jimi perform again, and the knowledge that, in another world, this was the last time he ever would play in public.

The band tore into "They Can't Take Away Our Music." There's a sound a well-miked snare drum makes on stage that you can never get on record, like an axe splitting wood. That sound was reason enough to be there. Burdon had shag-cut hair past his shoulders, looking younger that I remembered him, rejuvenated by the band's energy. A spotlight hit Howard Scot for his guitar solo and the notes he played cut through the rhythm section like lasers. He fired them out of a blond-neck, sunburst Telecaster, looking fierce in sideburns that came down to meet the ends of his mustache.

As the spotlight tracked him I saw Jimi in the audience down front. Monika, his blonde German ice-skating girlfriend, was with him, also Devon Wilson from New York and five or six other people all crowded around his table. Jimi was wearing a shirt that looked like it was made out of peacock feathers.

I didn't see Erika. I wouldn't have a chance to talk to Jimi until after the show anyway. I stayed where I was and listened to the band. They did about half their album, standards like "Midnight Hour" and a couple of Animals tunes. They finished off with "Spill The Wine" and by this point the jazz crowd was on its feet.

Burdon gestured to Jimi and he got up on stage. He already had his black Strat up there, and he strapped it on and they went into "Tobacco Road." It was awkward at first. Jimi seemed to expect to run things and the rest of the band wasn't interested. When the time came they gave him a solo and Jimi cranked up and played hard.

Once Jimi started to play the personality clashes didn't matter. It was loud enough that I thought my eardrums might bleed. His feedback went right inside me and left me ringing like expensive crystal.

Afterward they went into "Mother Earth" where he traded licks with

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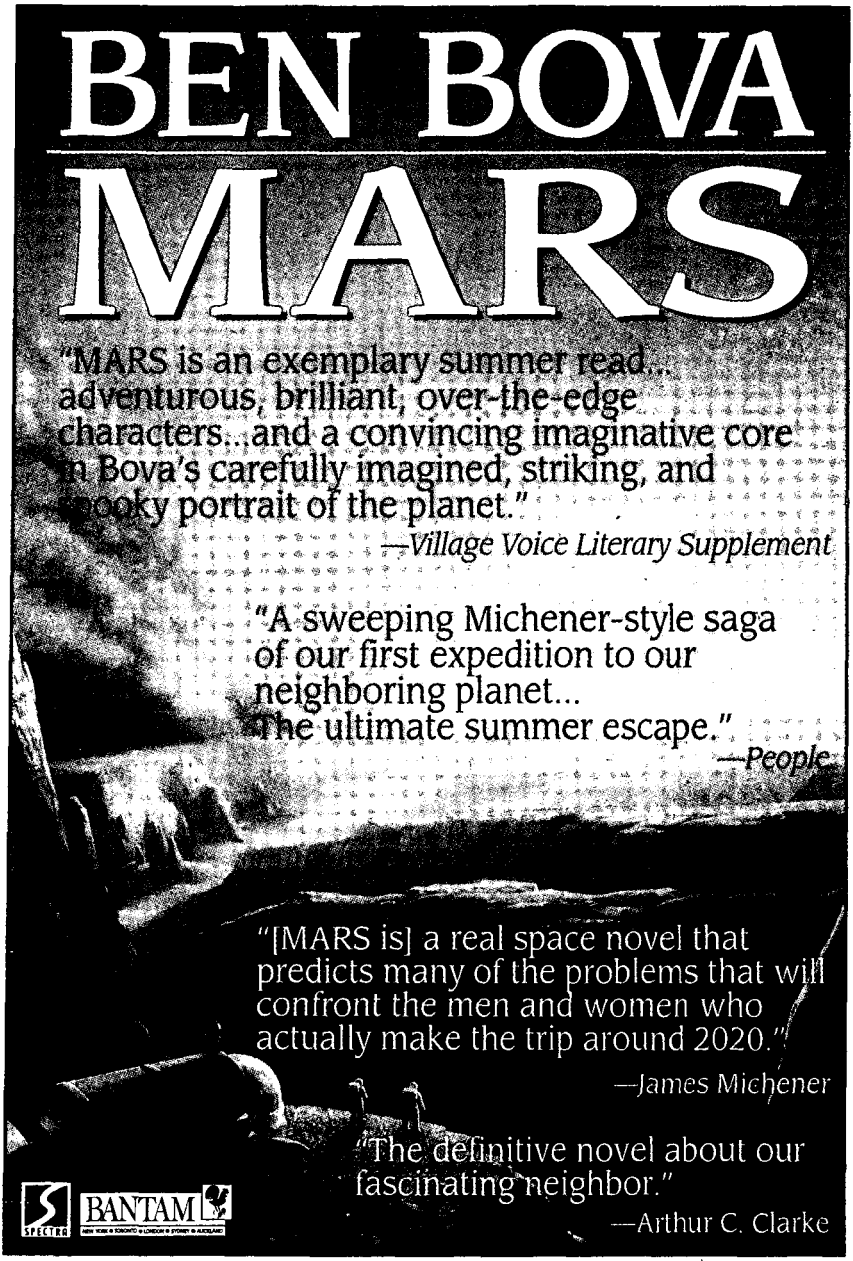
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Howard Scot and then they both played blistering solos. The band wound the song up and said their thank yous and split. The house lights came up and the magic disappeared, leaving spilled drinks and cigarette butts, the knowledge that the last train had already run and there would be long queues for a taxi.

For me it was worse. It was the sudden fear that this would after all be Jimi's last show. There was no sign of Erika and I started to panic. What if Jimi went out the back door and disappeared? A heavyset guy in leathers refused to let me backstage.

I knew where Hendrix was staying, in Monika's flat near Ladbroke Grove. I was sitting at the bar, thinking about lying in wait all night outside the flat, when Erika finally showed up. She was breathtaking in a strapless cream-colored dress. I had seen that body naked, had spent the night next to her, and never really touched her. I knew I wouldn't get another chance. She had a young guy with her in leather pants and a white shirt and a pony tail like mine. She saw me as I stood up and the two of them made their way over. "Have they already finished, then?" Erika asked.

I nodded. I wanted to apologize for the night before, but it wasn't the time or place, even if she'd wanted to hear it. She introduced me to the guy, whose name I immediately forgot.

This time there was no problem getting backstage. The dressing room was mobbed, and a line of young women stood against the wall, like they were there for an audition. Monika and Devon guarded Jimi from either side. Now that he was through playing he looked drained. His eyes were narrow and lined and there was no light behind his smile.

After all the hours I'd tried to imagine this moment, I was speechless. I knew Jimi was lost by looking at him. I was an idiot to think I could change that.

Then he saw Erika. He came to life and hurried over to hug her. He was not quite as tall as me and there was a shyness in the way he moved that was the opposite of the way he was on stage. He kissed Erika on the lips and said, "Baby, you look so *tired*. I'm not trying to put you down, I'm just worried, you know, I want to be sure you're okay and everything."

"I'm fine. Listen, this is a friend of mine, Ray, from the States. He needs to talk to you and I think you should listen."

I tried to swallow what felt like a ball-bearing, stuck halfway down to my stomach. Jimi shook my hand and said, "Hey, Ray, brother, what's happening?" The grip was familiar, large and dry and powerful. Everything about him was familiar. It was like I'd known him all my life. "So did you like catch the show and everything?"

"Yeah, it was really good. I saw you in Dallas, too, the first two times."

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"Oh yeah, Dallas, wow, man, that place is a real hassle sometimes. That first show everybody got real uptight over a little lighter fuel, you know?" He turned to Erika to bring her in. "They wouldn't let me burn my guitar or anything so I kind of put out this row of footlights."

"With the head of his guitar," I said.

"See? The man was there."

Erika touched Jimi's cheek. Over her shoulder I saw the young guy in the leather pants talking with Eric Burdon. She said, "Jimi, I really think you're pushing yourself too hard."

"Well, you know how it is, this and that, I got that trial thing coming up Friday. And there's always somebody wants you to be somewhere or something, you know, it's hard to get away."

"Could you get away with me," I said, finding my nerve again. "Just for a couple of minutes?"

Jimi looked at Erika and she said, "Go ahead, Jimi, I'll wait here."

We went through a fire door into an alley behind the club. It was red brick and dark and the night had turned chilly. "Wooo, man," Jimi said. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to the weather over here. This is supposed to be September, can you dig?"

I nodded. "Look, this is going to sound weird to you however I say it. I don't know any way to do this except just blurt it out, okay?"

"Yeah, okay, whatever."

I squatted down and Jimi squatted next to me, his huge hands tucked into his armpits. I looked at the bricks at my feet and said, "I know you're open to things that most people aren't. UFOs and magic and spiritual things. So if I sound crazy maybe you'll give me a chance to, I don't know, a chance to convince you."

I knew I had to go ahead and say it or I was going to lose him. "I'm from the future, and I can prove it."

"Oh, man."

"I know things nobody could possibly know. I know you want to get back with Chas Chandler again. I know you're planning to fly back to New York after court on Friday, to get the tapes for the new record, for *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*, and bring them back here for you and Chas to work on, to finish the record, so you can go play with Miles Davis."

Jimi looked genuinely terrified. I hated to scare him, hated to look like some obsessed lunatic. "Who are you?" he said.

"My name is Ray Shackleford. I'm from 1989. I want to save your life."

"Mike Jeffery sent you, right? Oh God, I knew this was gonna happen."

"I'm not from Jeffery, I swear to you. I want you to finish the record. I saw a list you wrote out for it." I reeled off the song titles on the

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first two sides. "Side Three you had starting with 'Night Bird Flying' again—how could I know all this?"

"I don't know."

"Because I'm who I say I am. And in the world I come from, you die on Friday morning because you take a few too many of Monika's sleeping pills and choke to death in your sleep."

"Oh, man." He looked at me sideways, like half of him wanted to laugh and the other half wanted to run away. "Oh man."

I rubbed my hands over my face, tried to relax. "Don't make up your mind yet. Just listen. I know your rooms at the Cumberland are a cover and you're staying with Monika at 22 Lansdowne Crescent. I know you just sent Billy Cox home because of an acid freak-out. I know you can't trust any of these people who are all over you because they all want something."

Jimi balanced himself with one hand and turned until his back rested against the wall of the club. "Man, it's like, I just don't know anymore, you understand? There's all these people and there's this new thing, like peace and love, right, and maybe these people really do love me, but. . ."

"Maybe they just need what you have. They see you on stage and they see how that music makes you so alive, and they all want that. Even if they have to take it away from you to get it."

Jimi didn't say anything.

"That's not what I want. I want to save your life. I want to see *First Rays* finished."

Jimi shook his head. "So tell me again what's supposed to happen to me? I mean tell me exactly."

I told him. I told him what the inside of Monika's flat looked like, I told him the pills were called Vesperax and he shouldn't take more than two, I told him how Monika would find him Friday morning, vomit smeared around his mouth.

"Man," he said, "you're really not bullshitting me are you? You really know something. You're from when?"

"1989."

"And I never finish *First Rays* or *Straight Ahead* or anything?"

"No. They did a single album called *Cry of Love* and a soundtrack for this really stupid movie called *Rainbow Bridge*, from that concert you did in Maui. Reprise threw them together from whatever was lying around. But everybody still knows who you are. You still win guitar magazine polls as favorite guitarist. They put music on these computer discs now, they call them compact discs, and they've reissued all your stuff, plus live albums and interviews and studio jams, everything they could find."

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"So I guess they've got computers playing everything, right? Is that what the music is like?"

"It's like Led Zeppelin, mostly, only heavier. Heavy metal, they call it. That's what most kids listen to."

"Man."

"The Beatles never get back together, but the Stones are still touring. And the Who."

"I don't know, man, this all sounds so weird and everything, all those old guys playing rock and roll. Did everything just like stop after I died?"

"Pretty much. There was something called punk at the end of the seventies, that was pretty exciting, only it got commercialized too fast. Now there's rap, which is drum machines and chanting, not much music in it at all. But if you live, see, you can change it. With *First Rays*, by playing with Miles—"

The back door of the club swung open. Monika and Devon were there, and a black man in an expensive suit and a neatly trimmed beard. "Jimi," Monika said, "shouldn't we maybe be going home now?"

For a minute I'd had him. Now Monika had brought him back to earth, the real world of food and bed and court cases. He stood up and dusted at his velvet trousers. "Yeah, okay, whatever."

I stood up too. "Listen," I said. "I want to come see you. Tomorrow night, at Monika's place. To make sure nothing happens, okay?"

"Sure, man, come over about twelve or something, all right? We can talk some more, that'll be real nice."

As they went inside I heard Monika asking, "Who was that funny man? What was he wanting?"

I stayed in the alley for a minute or two to get my breath. When I went back in, Jimi was gone, and so were Erika and her new boyfriend. But it was okay. Everything was going to be okay.

I was at Lansdowne Crescent at midnight sharp Thursday night. I knocked on the door of the downstairs flat and even tried to see in the window but the place was dark and nobody answered.

I sat on the steps to wait. It hadn't rained all day but the air was damp and the chill got into my bones. I was wearing new clothes that I'd bought on Oxford Street and I'd been to see Sly Stone at the Lyceum. I'd seen Eric Clapton in one of the box seats, but Jimi didn't show.

When he wasn't at Monika's flat by two I started to worry. He might have decided I was crazy and gone to the Cumberland Hotel to avoid me. He could take the same Vesperax at the Cumberland as he could at Monika's and wind up just as dead.

I heard Monika's sports car a little before three. A minute or so later

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the two of them came down the metal stairs, Monika in the lead. "Jimi," she said, "that strange man is again coming round."

Jimi looked disappointed to see me. "I'm really sorry," he said, "there was this thing at this rich cat's flat I had to go to."

"You just have to promise me one thing and I'll get out of here. Promise me you won't take more than two of Monika's sleeping pills. They're stronger than anything you're used to."

"If I don't sleep tonight I swear I'll go out of my mind."

"Just take one or two, and if they don't put you out right away, give them another few minutes. I promise you they'll knock you out. And you'll still be alive tomorrow."

Monika had only been half listening. "Is this man making threats to you?"

"No, be cool baby, he wants to help me."

"Everybody is wanting to help you."

"I just want him to promise," I said to her. "If he takes any of your Vesperax, he shouldn't have more than two."

"Okay, all right, already, I promise." He laughed with no feeling in it. "I promise."

I shook his hand and said good night. For a while I stood across the street in the cold, knowing there was nothing more I could do. Finally I caught a cab on Ladbroke Grove and went back to my hotel.

I was outside the flat at ten the next morning. My heart was in my mouth. I hadn't fallen asleep until after sunup and it seemed like only seconds later that I got my wake-up call. I felt like a knife that had been sharpened over and over for a single job, and now the job was nearly done but I was worn away to nothing. I sat and stared at my watch and every few seconds my eyes would flick back to the wrought iron gate at Number 22.

At 10:13 Monika came up the stairs, looking rumpled. She headed down the street toward the local market. It took all I had not to bolt down the stairs to see if Jimi was okay.

Monika was back at 10:24. I was wound so tight that I jumped to my feet when I saw her. I hadn't meant to say anything to her but now it was too late. She froze and stared at me as I ran across the street.

"You again," she said.

"When you go back to bed, please, please make sure Jimi's okay. If it looks like he's been throwing up, come get me. I know what to do."

"I only gave him the two pills. Like you said."

"He might have gotten up in the night and taken more. Just check him, please."

"I will check him. Now please go."

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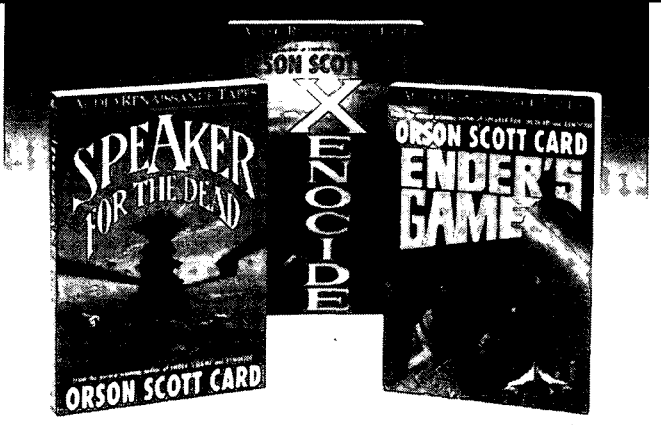

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I nodded and walked away so she wouldn't call the cops. She went downstairs, I circled the block and sat on the curb again. Worst case, the ambulance would be here at 11:30. It was a long wait. I spent it in weird, violent fantasies in which I fought the ambulance attendants for Jimi's life.

Eleven-thirty came and went, and I started to breathe easier. By 11:45 I was lightheaded, ecstatic. By noon the fatigue caught up to me. I walked back to Notting Hill Gate and found a bakery with sweet rolls and orange juice and lingered over them as long as I could stand it.

At one P.M. I made a last pass by the flat. All was quiet. No ambulances, no police, and Monika's car was parked where it had been.

Jimi was alive.

I had a long, deep sleep, then went down to the lobby, where there was a television. There was nothing on the news about Hendrix, just train strikes and the ongoing hostage crisis in Jordan, where three hijacked airliners had been blown up. A newsreader asked if we had entered the Age of Terrorism and I didn't want to be the one to tell him yes, we had. The *fedayeen,* the men of sacrifice, were sharing their sense of helplessness with the world. Just like the rest of the starving and desperate people picking up guns and knives in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Could Jimi Hendrix change that? Could he change the fact that my father was dead without my ever having been able to talk to him, that I'd wasted the last eleven years on a bad marriage, and that even that was now over?

I walked down Southampton to a nice Italian place I'd found. It was a beautiful evening, too beautiful to spend giving myself the third degree. Hendrix could do as much good as anyone, and I'd given him some time to do it in. It might take him weeks to come up with a final mix of the album and I would hang around until he did.

I lingered over dinner and took a cab to the Speak after midnight. There was always the chance that Erika would show up, or somebody else that I might want to meet. I was ready for something.

The room was crowded when I got there, and Rod Stewart and the Faces were playing loud enough to rattle the glasses on the bar. I got a beer and let the movement of the crowd take me toward the stage.

I wasn't too surprised when I saw Jimi holding court at a row of tables down front. He saw me on the sidelines and beckoned me over. "Heyyyyy," shaking my hand. "My man. Future man. What did you say your name was?"

"Ray."

"Ray. Cat that knows his drugs. That shit of Monika's, like, I took a couple and I was laying there, thinking, 'Man, this is not happening,'

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and I was gonna get up and take some more and then I remembered what you said so I just lay there awhile longer and then pow, it just laid me *out*. Hey, you got to meet my people. This is Mitch, and Sly Stone, you know Monika, this is Devon and this is Eric Clapton. Next to Eric there is the Queen of Sheba. Yes, the Queen of Sheba, thank you very much." Actually it was Pattie Boyd, still married to George Harrison. Clapton would write "Layla" for her next year in Miami.

I shook hands all around and somebody brought me a chair. I'll never forget the next two hours. Part of it was the glamour, of course. They were all beautiful and rich, talented and famous. None of that was as important as the way music mattered to all of them. The conversations were hard to follow, three or four of them going at once, Eric earnest and adamant, Sly full of revolutionary fervor, Jimi laid back, saying, "Well, you know, like, dig, brother," while the music blasted all around us. Like in a song, the words didn't matter as much as the feeling, the community, the warmth. Jimi seemed renewed. Maybe things had gone well in court, maybe on some level he knew he'd cheated death. Maybe all he'd needed was a good night's sleep.

After the Faces finished Jimi and Eric got up to jam. Jimi wanted to play "Sunshine Of Your Love" and Eric didn't. Jimi started it anyway, laughing and saying, "Oh come on, don't act like you don't know it, it goes just like this here," and they ended up trading solos for ten minutes while Ron Wood and Kenny Jones backed them up. They did "Key To The Highway" and then Sly got up and sang "Land Of A Thousand Dances." A part of me knew that it would never have happened without me, and it was all the thanks I needed.

The jam broke up a little after two. It could have gone on forever and been all right with me. Monika and Devon, still jockeying for position, went backstage. I stayed and talked with Pattie Boyd, mostly about her sister and Mick Fleetwood. She was surprised I knew so much about Fleetwood Mac, since they hadn't really broken in America yet.

Jimi and the others came out carrying guitar cases. I stood around with them and when I had a chance I asked Jimi about New York and the tapes.

"Oh yeah, for sure, man, I talked to Chas this afternoon. He's got me a flight over on Monday and then I'm going to come back and we're going to see if we can do a thing with them. He's really groovy about it, I think it's going to happen. Listen, when I get back, you should really come down with us and hear what we've got."

"I'd like that," I said.

I guess I wanted him to give me addresses and phone numbers on the spot, and it took me a second to realize he was only being polite. "Sure, man, you can like come by the studio or something, it'll be real nice."

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"Okay," I said. "Thanks." I shook his hand. I didn't want to leave, but the time had clearly come.

Jimi felt it and let me off the hook. "If you're not doing anything, you could come along over to this party. Probably be some, I don't know, like free booze or food or girls or something."

It was the kind of thing he must have done all the time, one more little act of kindness, like all the others that had eaten him up, chipped away pieces of him until there was nothing left. At that moment I didn't care. I was grateful for the little piece he offered me. "Yeah. I'd like that."

The group moved slowly toward the stairs. Jimi handed me his guitar case while he put on a trench coat. One more thing to make me feel like I belonged. Monika kissed him quickly and went ahead to get her car. We went upstairs into the cold light of Margaret Street. There were only a few people left on the sidewalks.

"Christ, we'll never get a cab," Eric said.

"I'll go ring one up, shall I?" Pattie said. She moved in close to him and he put his arm around her. It made me lonely to look at them.

"Give it a minute," Eric said. "Something will turn up."

Some kid with shaggy hair over his ears and collar came up to talk to Jimi. I couldn't hear any actual words, but the rhythm was American and sounded harsh and unpleasant. Jimi stood there with his hands in the pockets of his trench coat, the guitar at his feet, smiling and answering the kid's questions. I looked away for a second, trying to spot Monika or a cab.

When I looked back the kid had a gun.

I ran for Jimi, yelling something. Jimi turned his head and looked at me running toward him. He didn't try to get away, he just smiled and said, "It's not up to me to save the world, Ray. And it's not up to you to save me. I'm the one that has to die when it's time for me to die. You got to save your own self."

Jimi turned back to the kid and the kid fired five times, point blank, into Jimi's chest.

I took another step forward and drifted ten feet back, like some personal hurricane had picked me up and blown me away. I tried to hold on but it was no good. Jimi was gone. I would have to go on without him. I fell backward into the side of the building, into silence, into darkness, into the future. ●

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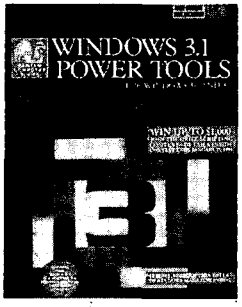

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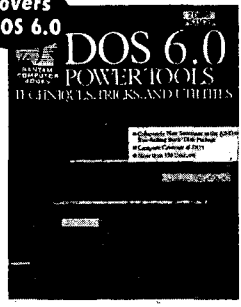

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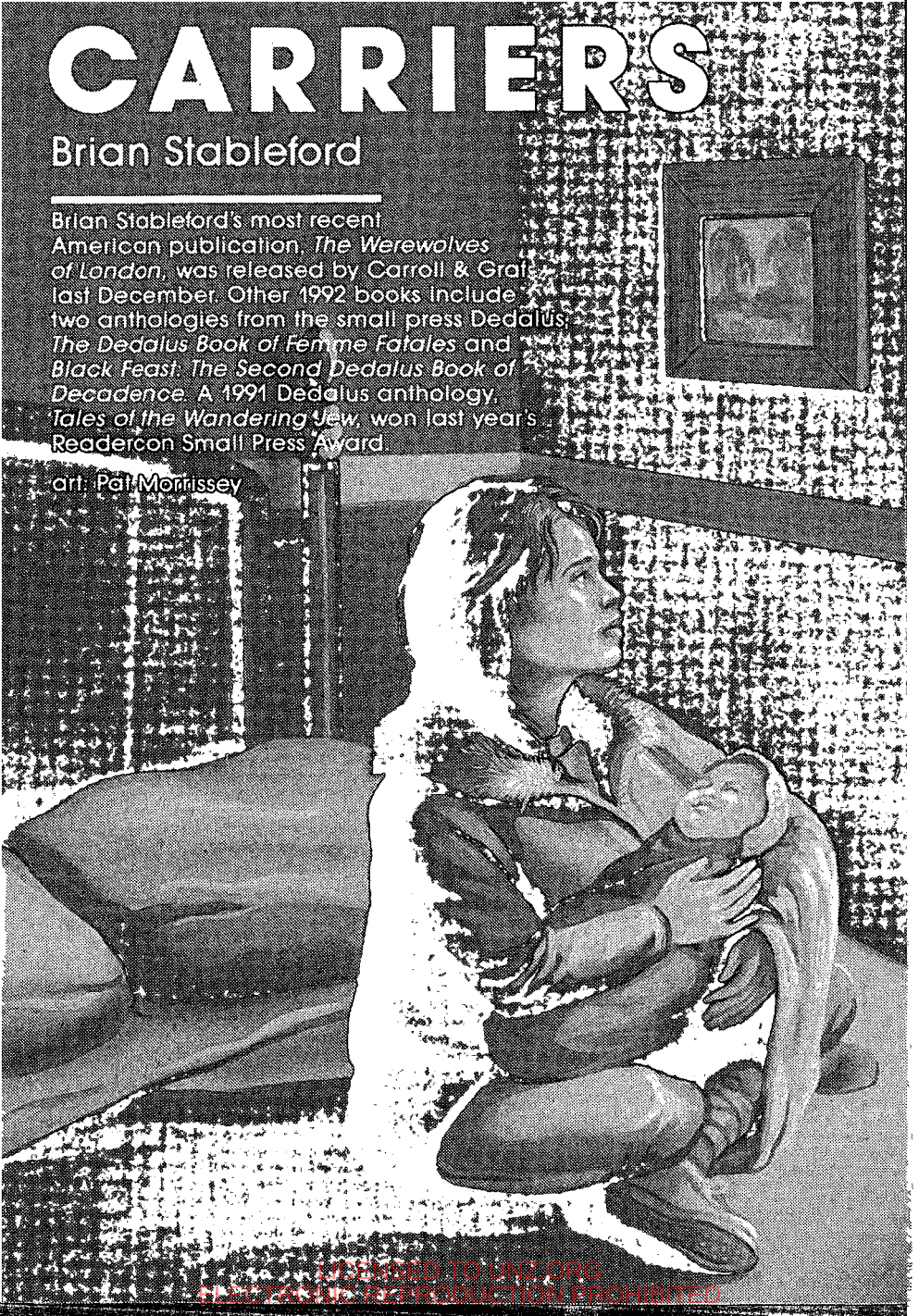

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Bowring heard the noise of the two helicopters while he was in the bloodshed vamping the sows, but even when they'd crossed over three times he didn't hurry out to take a look. He carried on linking up the needles to the sows' necks, working with practiced precision. A few of the younger ones stirred in their hammocks, mewing faintly, and he gentled them reflexively with his work-roughened hand. Not that he thought of them as feeling creatures—no farmer of any kind could afford to be sentimental about his stock, and bloodfarmers least of all. To him the sows were just fleshy factories, automated production lines for all the useful products harvested with their cytogenically augmented leucocytes and erythrocytes.

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It wasn't until he had completed the round that he went outside and stood there, shading his eyes from the early morning sun, peering up at the helicopters as they roared overhead for the fourth time. They were dark green, and carried army insignia. They were only sixty or seventy feet off the ground, and gave the impression that they might tear the satellite dish off the chimney if they got too close to the house.

"Get the hell out of my airspace!" he said. He spoke aloud, but he didn't bother to shout, because they'd never hear him. "Just get the hell out, and don't come back."

Army vehicles always reminded him of the *Ares*. Even ordinary vehicles did, sometimes. He always preferred to stay indoors when the blood-truck did its rounds, leaving the driver and his mate to load the daily cargo by themselves.

The soldier sitting beside the pilot in the bubble of the leading machine was pointing down at him and chattering away into a hand-held microphone, but both the helicopters went straight on, without making any attempt to land. This time, they didn't come back—they zoomed away down the valley, toward the distant sea.

"What was that all about?" said Bowring, still speaking aloud although there was no one to hear him. He was quite unselfconscious about talking to himself; it was one of the privileges of being a recluse.

He went back into the bloodshed to check the lines, detaching them one by one. As he went he collected the bladderpacks, laying them out with meticulous care in the huge steel vacuum-flasks where they were stored for their journey to the city, nested in ice. He sealed each drum carefully, making sure the labels were fully filled-out, and then began rolling them into the yard to await collection. He stacked them in the shade of the lean-to beside the gate, and covered them with a tarpaulin. The truck was due at ten, and was rarely late, but he was always careful. The legacy of his training was still imprinted on all his habits and customs; when it came to routines he was a real machine.

The moment he entered the house he knew that something was wrong. Nothing had been disturbed and there were no tell-tale footprints in the hall, but he knew that while he had been in the shed someone had opened the unlocked door, come in, and closed it again. The balance of the odors which inhabited the house had been disturbed, and even though the sour-sweet scent of the sows' blood still lingered in his nostrils he sensed the change.

He knew his personal space as minutely as that, and always had done since the long months of that interminable homeward journey in the *Ares*, when his personal space had been restricted to the interior of an imperfectly functioning spacesuit.

He went into the kitchen, and took the shotgun from the cupboard

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beneath the sink. He went to the drawer to get two shells, and loaded it. Then he simply stood still and listened very carefully, trying to catch the sound of a surreptitious movement.

What he heard instead was a muffled whimpering sound, like the sound the young sows sometimes made when they were too full of their overprolific blood—or when some cowboy in a chopper disturbed their peace. It was coming from the bedroom.

Bowring shuffled off his yardboots, and then tiptoed to the stairwell in his stockinged feet. He went up slowly, avoiding the stairs which creaked, with his right forefinger balanced on the trigger-guard of the gun.

The bedroom door was closed, and he hesitated before it. He had seen enough television to know what to do in such situations, but he knew that the door was solid and that the catch was sturdy—and that he didn't have the strength to break it down with a single charge.

He heard the crying sound again, a little louder this time. He reached out and turned the handle of the door. Rather than throwing it violently back and leaping through, as melodramatic tradition demanded, he pushed it slowly inward while he stayed outside, gun at the ready.

The girl who was sitting on the bed started violently as the door opened, and looked at him in stark terror. She leaned sideways reflexively to shield the whimpering baby which she had laid down on his bed.

"Don't!" she implored him. "Please don't!"

He let the muzzle of the gun fall, so that it was pointing at the floor.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he said, harshly. The tension had not yet eased out of his anxious muscles. "You've no right to come into my house."

"I had to!" she said. "Please don't turn me in. Please! I haven't done anything. It's all a mistake. *I haven't done anything!*"

"The helicopters," he said, belatedly making the connection. "They were searching for you?"

She nodded. "It's a mistake," she said, again. "I'm not what they think. They want to take the baby, but it's all a mistake. She's all right. She's not what they say."

She couldn't be more than seventeen, maybe less. She was wearing a dingy green anorak, faded jeans and battered sneakers. Her pale face was dirty and her mousy brown hair was disheveled. The blanket in which the baby was wrapped was soiled both inside and out. They looked totally harmless and utterly pathetic—but they were in his house.

He opened his mouth to ask her what "they" thought she was, and what they said the baby was, but before he could form the words the doorbell rang. Evidently the helicopters had only been the spearhead of the operation; there were men on the ground too.

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Shit! he thought. *She's brought the whole world on to my land, knocking at my door.*

"Don't," she pleaded, her voice faint, as if terror had robbed her of the power to voice more than the single word.

He went back down the staircase and went to the door, still carrying the gun.

Three soldiers waited outside. One of them was a sergeant. All three tensed when they saw the gun in his hand, and moved as if to unship their own rifles from their shoulders, but he altered his grip, and leaned the shotgun against the wall just inside the door, butt down.

"Sorry," he said, insincerely. "I don't get many callers away out here."

"We're looking for a woman and a child," said the sergeant, unceremoniously. "We need to search the farm."

"No you don't," said Bowring. "It's my land. You've no right. Just leave, will you—and go quietly. I've got two hundred bloodstock sows in the bloodshed, and their yields are affected if something starts them pumping adrenaline."

The sergeant frowned. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But we do have the right, and we do need to do it. We'll go as quietly as we can, but we do have to check."

Just get them out, Bowring told himself. *Don't drag it out—just get it over with.*

"All right," said Bowring. "Check the barn, if you must, and the storage-bunkers. The henhouse too. But don't go blundering about in the bloodshed—there's nowhere in there to hide, and you can see everything you need to see from the doorway. There's no need to check the house. She isn't in here."

The sergeant's frown turned into a scowl. "Maybe she got in without you seeing her," he said.

"She couldn't have," said Bowring, stubbornly. "The back door's bolted, and the windows are screwed down. I can swear that no one's come through this door. But when I was upstairs a little while ago I did see somebody moving along the hedgerow beside the path that leads down the valley—just a glimpse, as they moved into the woods. It may have been one of your men, I suppose, but I don't think so. About four hundred yards that way, twenty or twenty-five minutes ago." He pointed.

The sergeant turned to one of his companions. "Take MacArdle and Flint, and get along to the woods," he said. Then he turned back to Bowring. "We'll still have to search the farm," he said, trying to match him for stubbornness—as if anyone could be as pig-headed as a blood-farmer.

"Do it quickly and quietly," said Bowring, maintaining his position in

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the doorway, so that no one could go past. "Be careful with the drums by the gate—and don't go into the bloodshed."

"And the house," said the sergeant. "I'll have to search the house."

"That's not necessary," said Bowring, staring the sergeant in the eye.

The sergeant stared back determinedly, but then his forehead furrowed in a slight frown and his gaze flickered. "Don't I know you?" he said, uncertainly.

"No," said Bowring, firmly. "You don't."

"Jesus," said the remaining soldier, as enlightenment dawned. "It's that guy who came back from Mars. It's Bob Bowring. What the fuck're you doing in a place like this?"

"I live here," said Bowring, flatly. "It's my home." Still he didn't move—but now the sergeant backed off half a stride, and didn't seem ready to meet his stare. The fact that he recognized Bowring's name had changed his attitude. He knew now that Bowring was an ex-military man himself, officer class—not to mention an ex-hero and an ex-VIP. He didn't want to get into an argument with someone who could make trouble for him.

"Okay," he said, finally. "We'll check the barn and the other places. I'll do the shed myself—carefully. Thanks."

"Don't take too long about it," said Bowring, closing the door and thumbing the deadlock. But he was under no illusion that he had won anything more than a little time. He knew that they'd be back. He hadn't dared ask them what they were looking for.

"I should have turned her in," he murmured. "And got it over with, once and for all." But he couldn't convince himself. He still had curiosity, no matter how much he valued his privacy. He was interested to know why the army was out chasing a girl and a baby. But curiosity had its price, and he shivered with a sudden complex flash of remembered odors, remembered pains, remembered loss and the memory of bright, bright stars in the long, long Martian night.

Slowly, he went back upstairs, remembering the way the soldier had described him: not as the man who *went* to Mars, but as the man who *came back*—as if the horrors of the homeward journey were all that counted, as if *being there* had meant little or nothing, and had accomplished nothing at all.

While the girl and the baby were cleaning up in the bathroom Bowring turned on the news channel. He didn't expect that there would be anything about the search on the news—he assumed, almost unthinkingly, that the operation would be secret—but he was wrong. He caught the headline almost immediately and thumbed the remote until the latest edit came up on screen. The shots of army helicopters were library stock,

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and they had to show a map to indicate where the search was taking place, but the commentary was fairly specific.

". . . carriers of a notifiable disease," the voice-over was saying. "Neither the mother nor the child shows any outward sign of illness, but members of the public should not approach them under any circumstances. Anyone who has seen the woman should contact the police on one of these numbers. . . ."

The unsmiling picture of the girl which they flashed up was a standard Central Directory still, which made her look older than she was. Her name was Janine Stenner. She was seventeen.

Bowring looked down at his hands as he contemplated the phrase "carriers of a notifiable disease." He had handled the baby and come into contact with more than one of its bodily fluids, and had touched the girl's hands too. But the hands were quite steady and he was slightly surprised by his own lack of anxiety. His reclusiveness was not born of a fear of contamination.

"It's a mistake," the girl had said. "I'm not what they say." And the soldiers had not been wearing any protective clothing.

"Carriers of *what?*" he said, aloud. "The black death?"

"It's a mistake," said a small voice, behind him. "It's not true."

She came into the room, looking nervously around at the bank of PCs against the wall. She could see through the open door into the lab, and she glanced at the equipment, as though she were anxious about what it implied as to the nature of his profession.

"Emma's asleep," she added, as she sat down on the swiveling chair at the workstation—he was already occupying the one and only armchair. "I left her on your bed."

He touched the remote to switch off the TV.

"Why do they *think* you've got a dangerous disease if you haven't?" he asked, brusquely. "Or is that just for public consumption—a lie to cover up some other reason?"

She shook her head. "They wanted to abort the baby," she said, softly. "They said I was carrying something—that the baby would be carrying it too. They had me shut up in some private clinic, way down south, but I ran away. It wasn't difficult to disappear, to begin with. I've been in Heysham for the last five months—but when Emma started to come. . . . I couldn't do it alone. I knew they'd trace me, but I had to get help . . . and it's not so easy to hide now. But I'm not ill, and neither is Emma. They don't know what they're talking about. They had others at the clinic, but none of us were ill—and they didn't mind touching us, *being* with us, even . . . it doesn't make any sense. It's all lies. I'm not going to let them take Emma. I'm not . . . but I don't have anywhere to go, now."

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"Do your parents know what's happening?" he asked, trying to sound gentle and caring.

She shook her head. "Mum died," she said. "I only ever had Mum."

"What about Emma's father?"

She looked up at him, very strangely, as though she knew that she was about to say something that would offend him. She opened her mouth, but then she shut it again, and shook her head. She looked around again, evidently desperate to change the subject, and said: "What is this place?"

"It's a farm," he said.

"What's a bloodshed?" Evidently she had been listening while he talked to the sergeant.

"This is a blood farm," he told her. "The bloodshed's where I keep the transgenic sows. They're genetically engineered to produce blood with various kinds of antibodies, hormones, and co-factors in it. It's not as nasty as it sounds—the sows are genetically-lobotomized, so the higher brain-functions are reduced. They're engineered for overproduction, and they *need* regular vamping—taking off the surplus isn't much different from milking cows. There are milk farms up the valley where they take augmented milk from transgenic ewes, but sows are better for human-transfusible blood. Don't be fooled by the lab—it's not real scientific work. I don't do research. I'm just a farmer."

She looked at him speculatively, but there was no trace of horror or repulsion in her gaze. She was a child of the genetic revolution; she took such things as blood farms for granted. "Are you really the man who came back from Mars?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, curtly.

"And now you're running a blood farm?"

"It's an honest job," he told her. "I was in pretty bad shape when the *Ares* reached Earth-orbit. They patched me up as well as they could, but I was unfit for any kind of military service—or most kinds of heavy work. My bones deteriorated, you see, while I was so long in free fall, and the suit wasn't intended for continuous wear over all those months."

"It must have been absolute hell," she said, with all the ingenuous frankness of youth. "Stuck inside your suit for so long, with two dead men for company." It was what she'd learned in school. When it had all happened she had been a babe in arms, not much older than her daughter.

"Exactly what is it they think you're carrying, Janine?" he asked. "And why are they so desperate that they called the army out?"

"I don't know," she said. "What was it like, being on Mars?"

It was obvious that she was trying to steer the conversation away from areas too uncomfortable for her to bear. Curiosity was a kind of refuge

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for her: a way of keeping her mind off her fears. She didn't really care what it had been like, being on Mars—which was just as well.

"Cramped," he said. "Like living in an overcrowded tent."

"I mean, what was *Mars* like?"

"Arid. Very red, and very dead."

"But you found life there."

"No we didn't. We found that there had *been* life there, billions of years before. When the solar system was younger." He stopped, but he could see that she wanted him to go on. Her eyes were so pale and frightened. He took a deep breath. "Once," he said, awkwardly, "Mars had an atmosphere, and liquid water. Long before life on Earth emerged from the sea there was life of a kind on Mars, but it all died out. *All* of it—nothing survived, even at the bacterial level. Not that there were many other levels, even in the good days. They're still arguing about its biochemical basis; the evidence I brought back was woefully inadequate and inconclusive." After another pause, he said: "They're going to come back, you know—the soldiers. That kind of operation doesn't get called off. They'll comb the area, back and forth, until they find you. As you said, *you* might be able to get away and hide, but the baby certainly can't."

She stared him in the face, and said: "You can hide us. This is a big place. There must be somewhere you can hide us."

"I don't think so. I really ought to turn you in."

"I'll do anything you want," she said, dropping her stare. When he didn't reply, she added: "You don't have to worry about *catching* anything. At the clinic, they knew, but it didn't . . . stop them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said, a little sharply.

She shrugged. "One of the male nurses," she said. "He . . ."

"Raped you?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly," she said. "But he shouldn't have. I was a *patient* . . . I was a virgin."

"Is that how you got pregnant? With Emma?"

She shook her head again, more violently. She was staring at the floor. "I was already pregnant," she said, in a low tone. She knew exactly what she was saying, and she was telling him for a purpose. She was implying that it had something to do with the reason they'd taken her into the clinic in the first place, and the reason they'd wanted to abort her baby, and the reason they had mobilized the army to chase her up hill and down dale as soon as they'd traced her. Did she think she had borne a new messiah or something?

"Do you have any idea at all why they're so keen to catch you?" he asked, keeping his voice perfectly level.

She shook her head yet again—but then she added: "I look like my Mum."

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He was only a farmer, but some knowledge of genetics was essential to his business, and he had two hundred cloned sows out in the bloodshed, not one of which had a father.

"You mean that you were a virgin birth too?" he queried. "A parthenogentic clone?"

She shrugged. The word "parthenogenetic" meant nothing to her. "I look like my Mum," she said. "That's why they took me to the clinic. As for Emma . . . maybe she'll look like me and maybe she won't. They think she will. But I'm healthy, and so is she. You can hide us, Mr. Bowring. I'll do anything you want, but *you musn't let them take Emma!*"

Is there anything I want? he asked himself, silently. *Is there anything I want, except space in which to move, and air to breathe, and solitude?*

It was an easy question to answer. There was nothing he wanted, except of course for the impossible things. He might have wanted to be someone else. He might have wanted to be someone other than the man who had come back from Mars. He might have wanted not to be the one and only carrier of that experience, that memory, that burden of sickness, horror, and guilt—not that there was anything to be guilty about; chance and chance alone had dictated the pattern of misfortune and malfunctions which had determined that the others should die while he survived . . . and yet, guilt was part of the burden.

In time, of course, others would go back to Mars, to carry forward the work, to carry forward the mission, to carry forward the hopes and ambitions of outward-looking men. It might be easier, then, to forget the bright stars and the alien sky, and the endless night-black desert which was only red by day. In the meantime, he wanted . . . nothing that lay within the realms of possibility.

"It's impossible," he said. His mouth was curiously dry. "You must see that it's impossible. We all have to live within the limits of possibility." He thought as he said it of his two dead companions, riding the *Ares* home in their coffin-suits. All the ingenuity in the world wouldn't have been adequate to the task of saving them. There had been nothing he or anyone else could do.

Why on earth do they want the girl? he wondered. *Why are they saying that she and the child are carrying some dread disease? Who's lying to whom, and why?*

The doorbell rang again, loudly and insistently.

This time, it was an officer—but the sergeant was with him, and so were the two men who'd been with the sergeant before. The officer was in his fifties, only a year or two younger than Bowring. He looked at Bowring with unfeigned respect, the way a man ought to look at a living legend. "I'm Captain Clarke, Lieutenant Bowring," he said. Bowring

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could tell that he hadn't cited the rank to stress that he was a superior officer, but simply out of politeness. Captain Clarke was a gentleman.

The gun was still propped up against the wall just inside the door. Bowring picked it up by the barrel, left-handed, and swung it up and around so that his right hand gripped the stock.

Clarke was genuinely astonished. "There's no need for that, sir," he said. It was odd to hear a captain calling someone he'd just addressed as lieutenant "sir."

"What do you want?" said Bowring, coldly.

"I need to talk to you. I'm very sorry, but it's necessary to search your farm again—including the house." The captain was trying hard not to shed his own amiablity in response to Bowring's hostility.

"No," said Bowring.

Clarke hesitated, and then switched into humoring mode. "The woman's here, isn't she?" he said "We're already fairly sure about that, Lieutenant—and nothing less than a comprehensive search will convince us otherwise."

"You can't come in," said Bowring.

"Yes, we can," said the captain, quietly. Bowring judged that if he hadn't been who he was, they would have come in already. If he'd been nobody in particular, they'd simply have brushed him aside. They wouldn't even have fetched a captain to do the job: a sergeant's stripes would have been authority enough.

"This isn't a trivial matter," Clarke continued, when Bowring didn't budge. "We have to take the girl and the baby into custody. I assure you that we don't intend to harm them."

"Why is she running away from you?" Bowring countered, even though he knew that it was half way to a dangerous admission.

"Because she doesn't understand. She knows that the doctors thought it might be best to abort her baby, and she thinks they'll harm it now it's here—but they won't. It's just that . . . we do need to have her in our care."

"Because she and the child are carrying some disease or other?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Bowring moved his hand to the trigger-guard of the shotgun. This time the sergeant had his own gun in his hands, and he moved it in response—but the captain was in his way.

The captain somehow reminded Bowring of *the* captain: the real captain, who had died on Mars; the captain whose rotting body, in spite of all their attempts to sterilize it, probably still harbored a measure of bacterial life: the only life that now existed on Mars.

"If she's infectious," said Bowring, "you and your men are taking a hell of a risk. Where are your masks and rubber gloves?"

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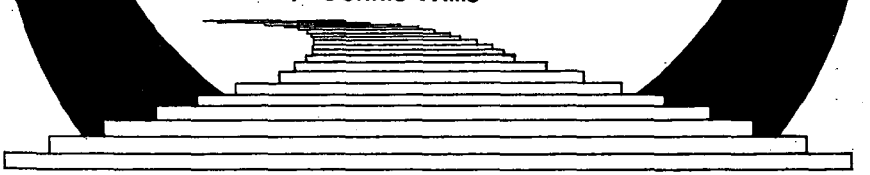

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"She's not infectious," said Captain Clarke. "At least, not yet."

"Are you going to explain that?" asked Bowring, when the captain showed no sign of elaborating.

Clarke sighed, letting his impatience show but keeping it under strict control. "We're wasting time, Mr. Bowring. We do intend to come in, and you really can't stop us. You know that."

"You little shit," said Bowring—inaccurately, because the captain was as tall as he and at least thirty pounds heavier. "Take one step inside my house and I'll blow you away, no matter who you are and no matter what you one day hope to be." He didn't mean it, and he was ashamed of the thought that he was making a fool of himself, but he couldn't move. He couldn't give way. He couldn't let them in.

The sergeant raised his weapon, but it was only a ploy to distract Bowring's attention; as Bowring moved half a step forward, to menace the sergeant with his own gun, Clarke grabbed the barrel and forced it aside. Bowring's finger, caught inside the trigger-guard, tightened reflexively, and the gun went off, but no one was in danger. Even so, the other soldiers were quick to react. The butt of a rifle came crashing down on his head from the side, and Bowring crumpled up, wishing that pain didn't always make him think of the *Ares*, and the long, long journey home.

When he came round he was lying on his bed, and Captain Clarke was standing at the window looking out over the fields at the distant sea. Bowring's head felt dizzy, but not as painful as it might have. He guessed that he'd been dosed with analgesics. Even so, inside his head he had the stink of his damaged suit in his nostrils, and two dead men for company.

As soon as he moved, the captain turned round.

"Don't try to sit up," Clarke advised him. "I'm truly sorry about that. The silly sod hit you too hard—but there's no fracture. There's a lump, but it'll go down in time."

Bowring raised a tentative hand. There was no bandage wrapped around his head. As Clarke said, there was indeed a huge and tender lump, but no blood matting his hair.

"You shouldn't have waved the gun like that," said the captain, seemingly uncertain as to whether he should try to sound annoyed or pitying. "It made things awkward, for no good purpose. You must have known you couldn't keep us out. Why didn't you just let us in?"

"Because I didn't want to," Bowring answered, his voice grating slightly.

"And because you didn't want to do it, you thought you didn't have to—because you're the man who came back from Mars?" Clarke sounded

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disappointed, like a man discovering feet of clay beneath an idol's wasted limbs.

"Something like that," Bowring agreed. He sounded and felt vindictive. Because, after all, he *was* the man who had come back from Mars. He was no longer famous, but he was remembered. He was a living legend. He was in a position to make his voice heard—to raise awkward questions whenever and wherever he wanted to, and demand answers.

"You can see her whenever you want to," said Clarke, seemingly reading his mind. "You can make sure that she's being well looked after, and that the baby's fine. Anything you want to set your mind at rest—even an explanation. But as of now, Lieutenant, you've been called up from the reserve. You're on active service again, and the active service you're required to provide is keeping your mouth shut. That's the deal. If you were anybody else, we'd fob you off with lies and threats, but you're supposed to be on our side. You're *supposed* to understand."

"Well, I don't," said Bowring, sourly, sitting up in spite of Clarke's advice. It hurt, but it was bearable. "Just what the hell is it that you think she's carrying?"

"She's carrying what you failed to bring back from Mars," said Clarke, coolly, as he leaned on the window-frame. "Alien life."

"What?" said Bowring, foolishly. It was beyond belief, but it didn't sound like a lie.

"We've been invaded," said Clarke, matter-of-factly.

Bowring took a few seconds to adjust his frame of mind before he said: "When?"

"The best guess is 1915—give or take three years."

"By a gang of parthenogentically reproducing females who just happen to look perfectly human?" said Bowring, sarcastically. "No doubt they've been in hiding ever since—and in the course of the past hundred-and-some years they've naturally forgotten who they really are, or failed to pass on their wisdom to subsequent generations. That's worse than some Hollywood antique!"

"She told you about the virgin birth, then?" said Clarke, quite untroubled by the B-movie scenario.

"I didn't believe her," Bowring said, nursing his throbbing head. After a few seconds it began to get better again. The soldier hadn't hit him *that* hard; he was, after all, an old man.

"Well, it's true," said Clarke. "You, of all people, shouldn't have been overly surprised by that."

"Because I came back from Mars?" said Bowring, failing this time to make the connection, although he'd made it readily enough before.

"Because you make your living in a bloodshed," Clarke came back at him. "A shed stocked with animals that have no fathers, because it's

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more convenient if they're forced to breed absolutely true . . . for exactly the same reason that it's convenient for the invaders' hosts to breed true, for ten or fifty or a hundred generations. Forget Mars, Lieutenant Bowring. Think bloodfarming. And then think how a biotech-minded species might go about organizing an alien invasion. No fleets, no firepower, no resistance, just . . ."

He paused, expectantly. Even though his head was aching, Bowring could see where he was at. "Just cytogenes," he said, completing the sentence. "Just artificial cytogenes. Engineered parasites—not so very different from the ones we implant in the cells of sows and ewes and all the other kinds of transgenics, to make them produce what we need."

He could follow the chain of logic easily enough. Cytogenes were packages of genetic material which functioned exactly like the genes in the nucleus of a cell, using the cell's constructive systems to reproduce themselves and to manufacture proteins. They were hereditary in the sense that they could be passed on from parent to child, but they could only be passed from mother to daughter, because ova retained their cytoplasm during the reproductive process and sperm didn't. They *could* be passed on as passengers in ordinary sexual reproduction, but once they had harmonized with a particular set of nuclear genes it was safer and more convenient simply to duplicate the entire set. Otherwise, there could be problems with the host's immune system. The transgenic sows in the bloodshed were all clones produced by induced parthenogenesis. Natural selection had never done much with cytogenes, but maybe that was just a freak of chance—genetic engineers had seen their potential quickly enough.

"How do you know she's carrying *alien* cytogenes?" Bowring asked. "Maybe they're the product of mutation—haven't we always found that all our best ideas were anticipated by nature, even if we didn't know it beforehand?"

"They're too complex," Clarke answered. "And they aren't made of DNA. They're closely related, chemically speaking, but not identical. All life on Earth, from viruses and paramecia to trees, mice and men, has a common chemical ancestor. Janine's cytogenes and our genetic systems may have a common ancestor too, but if they do, it existed several billions of years ago, probably not on Earth. We've never seen anything *exactly* like them before, although opinions vary as to whether we've seen some other kin of theirs."

There was only one place anyone could ever have seen "some other kin" of an alien cytogene, and Bowring had no difficulty at all in following the idea through to the appropriate spectrum of alternative possibilities.

"You're saying that this thing that Janine and the baby are carrying is related to the stuff I brought back from Mars?" he said. "You think

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Earth was invaded in *nineteen fifteen* by spores produced by Martian life-forms that died out more than a billion years ago?"

"That's one hypothesis," Clarke agreed, equably. "Maybe Mars was invaded, from somewhere else. Nobody knows. Nobody knows whether these things were designed by engineers or whether they just evolved somewhere out there in the infinite universe. Nobody knows whether we were targeted, or whether the things just drifted here. Maybe the whole damn universe is lousy with opportunistic cytogenes. Maybe our common chemical ancestor was something of the same sort. Nobody knows. But we're trying to find out—and while we do, Janine Stenner and all her blood relatives have to be in our care. We have to study them . . . and we have to control them, at least until we figure out what all the cytogenes are *for,* and what the future phases of their pre-planned evolution may produce. There *could* be nasty surprises yet in store, and we don't want to be taken unawares—as you'll readily understand, Lieutenant Bowring."

Little shit, thought Bowring, without much conviction. He knew full well that the other was right. Clarke, and those who gave him orders, had *known* that he would understand, had known that he could safely be brought aboard. He was, after all, a man who had already done his bit for humankind, and for the Great Adventure. He was one of the pioneers of the attempted conquest of the high frontier: one of DNA's first ambassadors to the universe at large.

At the end of the day, he thought, *that's all we are. Just carriers of our genes, instruments of their struggle for existence.*

He stood up, feeling a little weak at the knees but quite able to move. He came to stand beside Clarke at the window, as if to concede without actually having to admit that Clarke had been right all along. It was late afternoon now, and the sun was staining the curved roof of the bloodshed with angry yellow light. The truck which had collected the day's produce was long gone, and so were the helicopters and the soldiers. Everything was quiet. When Clarke was gone, everything would be back to normal—or almost to normal. He was back on active service again. He had a secret to keep, and something to think about.

"You should have explained it to *her,*" he said, after a pause to steady himself. "You should have told *her* what it was all about."

"She's just a child," said Clarke, reasonably. "She doesn't have your intelligence, and she doesn't have your sense of responsibility. We really do think it would be best if this didn't become the substance of rumors and wild reportage. Can you imagine what the press would do with a story of this kind? We may have seemed to you to be out on a witch-hunt, but can you imagine the kind of fears that could be stoked up by popular misconceptions of what's going on? There are those in our midst who are carriers of alien life—would you really want to explain that to

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the kind of people who think that what *you* do is some kind of voodoo? You must be very well aware of all the reasons why bloodfarming's the perfect job for someone who wants to cut himself off from all kinds of social intercourse. People really don't understand."

"You should have *explained*," said Bowring, stubbornly. "She has a right to know, to be given the chance to understand. She's a child of the revolution."

Clarke moved toward the door. He didn't touch Bowring, or even offer to shake hands. "You can see her whenever you like," the captain repeated. "In the meantime, you'd better take it easy until the lump goes down." He made as if to leave, but paused. "Did she ask you what it was like?" he said, softly. "Did she ask you how it felt to stand on alien sands, and look up at alien stars? Did she ask you what you were doing here, running a bloodfarm in the middle of nowhere?"

"Yes," said Bowring, faintly.

"And did she understand what *you* told her? Did she grasp what that all meant?"

Bowring thought about the bright, bright stars of the glorious Martian night; and the unbelievably rosy evenings; and the infinite deadness of the barren sunlit land; and the awful loneliness of the long, long ride home in the desolate, sick coffin-ship . . . and about the frail, inadequate relics of something once-living but long, long dead that he had carried with him, along with the bodies of his friends.

The images crowded in his mind, dissolving into a chaotic confusion of sensation which made him dizzy, derailing his train of thought and overwhelming his awareness of the present moment. Five or six seconds passed before he could suppress it and take command again.

Was it really possible, he wondered, that something more of Martian life had actually survived—or something of a common ancestor which united the living Earth with the corpse that was Mars?

"I couldn't explain it," he said, awkwardly, in answer to Clarke's challenge. "I didn't even want to. But I will try. Given time, I think I can make her understand. She has the right to try. She's a child of the revolution, after all."

"Maybe we all have a right to try," said Captain Clarke, "and maybe we all can"—and left him, then, to his solitude and to the dull pain of his as-yet-unending grief. ●

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THE GREEN CHILDREN

Dazed they were, and scared,
lying on the cold stones,
their arms and legs green.
Not the dark green of ivy,
not the yellow green of apples
ripe on the summer bough,
nor the deep green of the ocean
where it leans against its bed.
They were the green of leeks,
of new furled feather fern,
of the early leaf breaking soil.
When they opened their eyes,
their eyes were green, too,
and the little hairs on their arms
were inchworm green.
They spoke a green language
which the trees and flowers knew
but which we did not.

The boy died of a wasting,
the girl lived on,
eating broad beans,
forgetting her green tongue,
growing whiter with each day;
till she was christened
and married and all all white.
Not the white of milk
after the cream is skimmed off,
nor the white of October snow,
nor the white of a spring lily,
waxen and still,
nor the white of sea pearls
formed within the shell.
She was the white of the old moon
that shines over the hall.

—Jane Yolen

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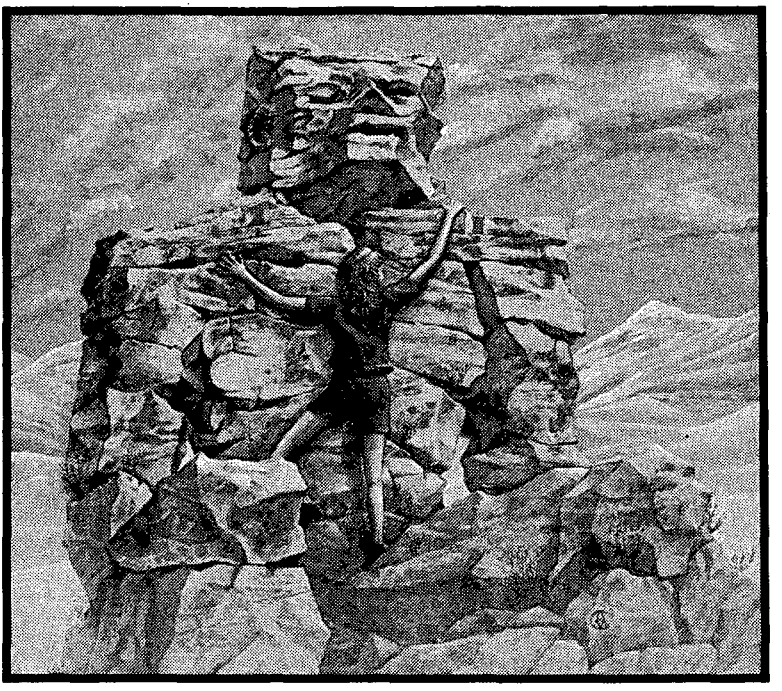

STONE MAN

Wennicke Eide

Wennicke Eide was born in Bergen, Norway. She has lived and worked in Oslo, Norway; Copenhagen, Denmark; and the United States. In 1975 she moved to New Mexico with her American husband, and they later relocated to West Virginia. When he died in 1988, Ms. Eide returned to Norway. She is presently responsible for the English language-lit department at Melvær Libris A/S, a large bookstore in Bergen. Ms. Eide started writing seriously in the early '80s. Her work has appeared in *Women of Darkness* and *F&SF*. "Stone Man" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

art: Alan M. Clark

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The long, narrow track which led uphill from the road and the bus stop was stony and steep. Heather and bracken grew close; no one had walked this way lately. Loose stones shifted beneath her boots.

Sweating, she shifted the pack on her shoulders. The ridge of the hill loomed closer, a clean, taut line against the pale sky; as she ascended the final few feet and her head rose above its barrier, the land opened to her: mountainous highlands, dun and gray barrenness overlaid by the purple of blooming heather. The sky was endless. A cool north wind blew, lifting her hair, drying her sweat.

In the distance, tucked snugly into the gentle curve of the next hill, she could see the cabin. Her step lightened. Striding with automatic sureness, her feet remembering each rock and each hole, she followed the path to its door.

As she had always done, she lowered the pack from her shoulders and rested it on the great flat stone which served as the front stoop, feeling her body lighten, suddenly buoyant with relief. Swinging her arms, she circled the cabin, inspecting the small close-cropped lawn dotted with sheep droppings, the age-silvered walls of thick timber, still covered with remnants of insulating tar, the peeling green shutters, the outhouse, the well. Finally, she extracted the large iron key from her pocket and inserted it in the lock. She had to twist with both hands. The door hinges creaked; a musty odor compounded of wood, old smoke, and cool earth met her: the smell of home.

She unpacked the food, and her few clothes, and opened the shutters and the windows to let in air and sun. The scent of coffee filled the room, accompanied by frying bacon. She sat at the sandscrubbed wooden table, overlooking the land through the north window.

The highlands stretched before her, ridge beyond ridge shaded in purple heather. Mountains rose beyond, cool and blue. Far to the west was a pale line of grey, neither land nor sky: the ocean. Coffee cup in hand, she sat in the old, creaking cane chair on the lawn, which she had cleared of sheep droppings, and watched the evening sun complete its inevitable descent toward the distant water, lending it its own flaming hues.

Darkness thickened, slowly erasing the nearer landscape; the mountains were black humps against the rose-colored sky, suddenly unfamiliar and slightly threatening. A shudder tightened her skin and brought goosepimples to her bare arms. She was a child again, small and vulnerable in a vast land, a little afraid of the dark.

She slammed the thick door behind her, closing the inside bolt before stoking the fire. She wanted more coffee but didn't drink; she did not want to have to go to the outhouse later, alone in the dark.

* * *

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In the morning, she woke once more herself, Ellen, forty-year-old divorcée who still winced each time memory touched on her marriage, and the long, agonizing process of mental as well as legal divorce.

Through the open window, a sheep's mournful bleat welcomed her; the well-known odors of dry wood and damp bedclothes reassured her that she was home. She stretched luxuriously, smelled her own sweat; she would air the bedclothes.

In a closet, she found an ancient pair of shorts, and a shirt that had been her father's; somehow they seemed more suitable attire than her city-bought clothes.

The sheep ran from the green when she opened the door, but did not run far. Calling softly, she offered a handful of salt.

She filled both buckets from the well and cleaned up her things from the night before, then put bread and cheese in her pocket and started up the gentle curve of the hill.

Near the ridge she paused. Below her, the chimney was the only part of the cabin still visible; the rest of the structure had disappeared under the hill. Another step erased it: last evidence of human habitation. She was alone with the mountains.

Breathing deeply, she faced the north wind. It carried the scent of sun-warmed heather along with other, more subtle odors, of stone and soil and snow, of the faraway and the unknown.

Standing atop a boulder, Ellen drank in the scent and the view. Her highlands, long-ago childhood paradise, abandoned for so many years, ungrudgingly welcoming her, receiving and enclosing her as if time had stood still. The wide, wide horizons had not shrunk, like everything else, with adulthood, but remained endless; by dwarfing her, they admitted her once more, as if she had never been away. Her heart sang.

Arms outstretched in an answering embrace, she circled, pivoting on her toes: south, west, north, east, all of it open to her, waiting, so many well-loved places to see. She hesitated, an uncertain compass pointing north/northeast, but knowing already, with a surge of anticipation and fear, which way she would go.

The Stone Man. During long, slow childhood vacations, he had been a constant companion. He had watched over her each night, through her north-looking window, and filled her opening eyes every morning. When she was very small, she had talked to him, loudly, leaning over the sill to peer at his impassive profile.

Later she had been drawn irresistibly to the foot of his massive shape, forbidden to her because of the precariously balanced mass of old rockslides, and the ever-present danger of new ones. She had climbed fallen rocks larger than the cabin, her feet light and sure on the loose stones

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whose movement, she knew, could trigger a much larger slide. She explored shallow, airy caves composed of uneven rocks; she picked pebbles of different colors and shapes, playing with them in shadowy corners, creating large herds of gray-white quartz sheep and iron-veined cows and horses, building them stone barns and stables, fencing in emerald patches of moss.

As she grew older, and the stone farm palled, she approached the Stone Man's huge, craggy front and began climbing. She was a thin, wiry child, graceful and light of foot, and the first part of the ascent was not difficult.

She knew the Stone Man's features as well as she knew her own: from the knees down, he was rock-bound, shapeless and dead, but above the rock fall rose his smooth, heavy thighs, his massive torso and shoulders. His neck was extremely thick, almost non-existent; his face from the front was a gray square with dark, brooding eyes and thick lips; in profile, he had a huge, beaked nose and an overhanging brow frowning in perpetual anger.

The child Ellen contented herself with climbing the uneven, easily scaled cleft between the Stone Man's thighs, where small clumps of heather sunk their roots deep within hair-thin crevices. Topping the cleft was a stone shelf, accessible from one side, where she rested before climbing back down. From the Stone Man's crotch, she could see the cabin, the thin thread of track leading from it to the ridge which marked the boundary between her highlands and civilization, the remote blue-misted silhouettes of other mountain ranges. The climb down was harder than the climb up; she could not see where to put her feet, and the downward motion gave her body a treacherous earthbound acceleration. But she was unafraid. Her feet knew the way, found each crack and each shelf. She never faltered; she never fell.

The most dangerous climb was the first one early each summer. Though Ellen knew her way up the Stone Man's body the way she knew each knothole in her own bedroom wall, he, unlike her room, *changed* each winter. Snow and hail battered him; ice forced its long, thin fingers inside the hairline cracks of his body. The spring rains unsettled him, widened his cracks, forced hunks of his stone flesh from his body to fall and break at his feet, until Ellen's feet would search in vain for old, familiar footholds. Still, there were always new ones. By summer's end, the new steps were as firmly entrenched in her body's memory as the old ones had been.

Ellen was fourteen when her family moved. Their new home was near the coast and the archipelago; each summer thereafter, they rented a house near the sea. The mountain cabin stood empty.

Ellen's new friends at school all summered by the sea. She was not

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unhappy to be able to compare vacation stories, speaking with authority of wind and water, of boating and swimming and fishing. The mountains of her childhood rested in the back of her mind, a precious but untouched jewel of memory.

When the baby was born, Ellen dropped out of school. Having made no conscious decision, she stopped attending classes; when the new semester began, she failed to sign up for new ones.

Paul touched something in Ellen; deep within his grey eyes she thought she recognized a part of herself. In bed, she strained for that part of him to touch her. Something dark and hot shifted, within her, lifting slightly only to lay back down. That was many years ago.

The marriage was not a happy one. They had little in common. Paul studied; Ellen cared for the demanding and fretful baby, trying to keep him quiet so he would not disturb Paul. Paul did not like to be disturbed. Ellen retreated from his sharp voice and unkind words, frightened and upset; anger and scorn had not been expressed by her own parents.

Retreating within herself, a habit already acquired during a solitary childhood, Ellen became silent. She had no real friends: moving to the city to study, she had left old friends behind; Paul, and her almost immediate pregnancy, had filled her life before she had a chance to find new ones.

She read romances and thrillers, afraid to feed her mind with anything more substantial, afraid of the savage emotional tumult she sensed deep within herself. She knew she was lonely; she also suspected the presence of deep resentment, even hatred.

On weekends, there were parties. Paul liked to drink then. Ellen did not dare drink much. She knew that she bored people, Paul had told her so often enough, but though a few drinks loosened her tongue, she did not trust the person who emerged then. She had stood by, helpless and frightened, while the person inside her, the *other* Ellen, talked loudly, wildly, expressing opinions and thoughts which created awkward silences in the room and caused people to turn and stare.

After a party, she downed a few more quick drinks in the kitchen before going to bed. For Paul, alcohol and sex went together. She waited with closed eyes, the room inside her eyelids wheeling softly above her; the alcohol on her own breath almost drowned out the stink on Paul's, and she barely felt his touch.

Paul liked to try new positions, as if change could substitute for the lack of warmth between them. Ellen pretended interest, though something within her shrank from the impersonal hands which molded her body like so much dead clay.

Some positions hurt. Ellen did not cry out, but she knew that he knew.

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It seemed to give him satisfaction. He came to prefer the painful positions. After a while, she learned that a small gasp of pain from her, an indrawn breath, would make him come faster. She no longer thought of their union as sex; it was a chore. Sex was something dark and hot deep within her, dimly remembered, perhaps dead: the pleasure she sometimes elicited with her own hands was of an entirely different quality.

Looking around her at the people they knew, Ellen did not see any happy marriages. She consoled herself with the child's growth, and told herself that at least Paul had a good job, and did not drink excessively, or beat her, as she knew some men did.

The fall their son started college, Paul asked for a divorce. Ellen was numb. She and Paul had nothing to say to each other, and their infrequent embraces were painful and cold; nothing held them together. Yet she was suddenly terrified.

She did not show Paul her fear. She agreed to an uncontested divorce, though she had seen him with another woman. Paul wanted the apartment. She moved out.

In a small, temporary room, she sat still, staring at the wall, an unopened book in her hands. Paul had made her a yearly settlement; she did not have to work. Her baby was grown, and a stranger; a new woman had taken her place as Paul's accessory. Nobody needed her.

A few friendly names from long ago floated idly through her mind without leaving an impression: even if she knew where to find them, what would they talk about now, after twenty years?

Looking farther back, beyond high school, she suddenly saw her childhood mountains, tall and shining, beckoning her.

Her parents were dead, but she remembered the name of their lawyer, a friend of her father's. It turned out that the key to the old cabin still rested in a box at his office, waiting for her.

The cool wind stroked twenty-five years from her brow. Feeling fourteen again, young and strong, eager, innocently new, Ellen strode to the foot of the Stone Man.

The cleft between his thighs was there, but she did not immediately start climbing. Leaning back, she craned her neck, looking up. The Stone Man's stern features glared foreshortened down at her, the bulge of brow shadowing his eyes, the nose a mere lump, not the proud beak she knew it to be. His shoulders rose dark against the sky. High above her head jutted the shelf of his groin: his balls, she suddenly thought, grinning to herself.

She began her climb. Her feet automatically sought twenty-five year-old footholds and then adjusted, as always, to new cracks and shelves in the rock. She was not afraid. Climbing slowly, stretching the time

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deliciously as she clung to the sun-warmed stone, she ascended the mountain. Still, it seemed only minutes had passed before she reached the end of the cleft and had to move sharply left, take a long step and one more before scrambling up on the Stone Man's balls.

Her back remembered a smooth resting place; leaning back, Ellen let her eyes trace the familiar view of cabin, thin track, far blue mountains. The sun toasted her. The wind caressed her cheeks. Closing her eyes, she listened to the silence, which was not absence of sound but merely of other humans and all their noise; she smelled wilderness on the wind.

Before starting her downhill climb, she patted the Stone Man's balls gently. Into her mind came the old rhyme that someone had written inside an exercise book, one of many used by herself as a child to draw in: Cold hard rock, heart of stone; what'd you do, old man, to be so alone?

"Are you lonely, Stone Man?" she whispered aloud.

Ellen had brought her books—not the romances, but geology texts from her first year of college. Afraid to consider the possibility of going back to school, she merely permitted herself to feel the rightness of bringing geology books to the mountains. She opened one half-heartedly, afraid to find that the text no longer made sense to her, but it did. Still she did not read much. The words on the page palled before the reality of the towering landscape.

The sun and wind browned her, the long hikes toughened her. Her body, which had begun the slackening and thickening of early middle age, became once more a firm, well-muscled machine; she walked and climbed, she chopped wood and carried water, she even repaired the crumbling stone wall which separated her small green lawn from the heather beyond.

Each morning, as the sun slanted through her window, she could see the Stone Man's profile, his hooded right eye, and knew that he watched her.

Her body became extremely sensitive. Sitting on a warm rock, she could feel its rough texture through her shorts, its heat on her skin, just as she was aware of her own soft buttocks against its hardness. Laying flat on the grass, she felt each straw, each prodding stalk against her own soft, dark spaces. At night she stroked herself, arching her gasping body against the quilt.

Sometimes she rose, padded barefoot to the window, and pressed her hot face to the cool glass. Leaning out, she called softly to the Stone Man, whose stern profile rose black against a star-scattered sky. Her cry was wordless, a soft, sighing moan in the night.

Leafing idly through the pages of her geology book, Ellen found an old

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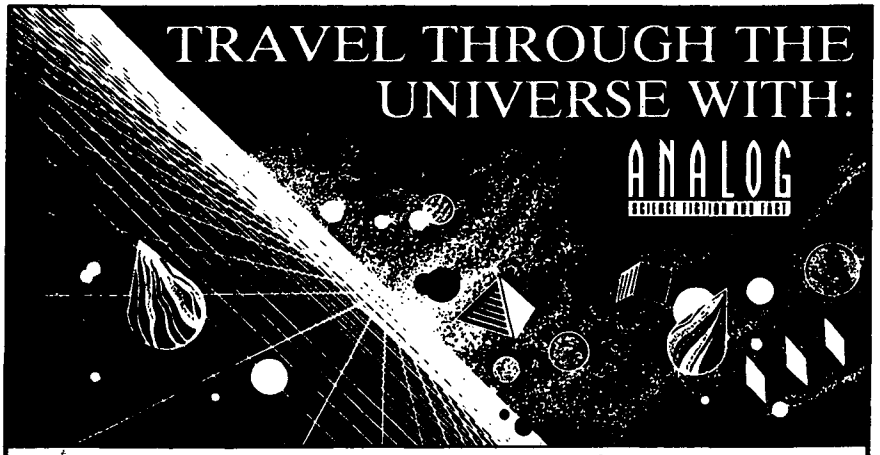

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note from Paul. It was not a love letter, merely a reminder to pick up some papers he needed. The rigid handwriting brought him into her cabin, the stranger, the man she had married, and she could not get him out.

Through his disapproving eyes, she saw the clutter and dust of the living room, the soot-grimed stove; she smelled grease, and smoke, and herself.

In bed, under the quilt, as she touched her own body, she suddenly felt his hands on her, turning her to one of the positions she hated. Remembered pain echoed through her; she sat up in bed, white and still, clutching the quilt to her breasts. Through the window she saw the Stone Man. Help me, a small voice within her cried.

But Paul did not go away. Though she cleaned the cabin, she could still see his disapproving face. The sheep had grazed on the lawn; she cleared away their droppings. She chopped more wood. Drawing several buckets of water and heating it, she washed herself thoroughly. Then she dressed hesitantly in her unused town clothes and sat idly on the lawn. She tried reading her geology book, but she seemed to hear a snickering voice telling her that she was too stupid to comprehend such a complicated text.

That evening, clouds covered the horizon, hiding the sun's glory. Ellen felt cold. She went early to bed and lay stiffly, afraid to touch herself.

She woke early from a formless, frightening dream and sat up in bed, taking courage from the Stone Man's brow rising out of the morning mist. In her pajamas, she padded downstairs and took Paul's note from the book. She laid it on the chopping block and lifted the axe.

Afterward, she crawled on hands and knees to make sure that every shred of paper was gathered in her hand before she opened the woodstove and dropped the crumpled white pieces on the glowing coals.

Paul did not appear that morning. Defiantly, Ellen dressed in her old shirt and shorts and headed uphill. The sun shone, its warm fingers melting the mist.

The Stone Man waited, his impassive eyes on her. Ellen walked to his foot and put both hands against the stone. She began to climb. Though the rock was warm against her palms, her fingertips touched icy dew deep within narrow crevices. Where the sun had not yet touched, the shadowed stone was damp. Ellen breathed on the chill stone, to warm him. She felt that the Stone Man, too, in his way, was vulnerable; they were sharing personal weaknesses, feeling mutual sympathy.

The cleft of the Stone Man's thighs narrowed. Ellen climbed to the left, stepping high, reaching for the outcropping shelf of his balls. Pulling herself up, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

She dozed. The sun baked her. Her body throbbed slowly in the heat,

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but its rhythm seemed shallow and too fast compared to the low, barely perceivable pulse deep below, a separate beat so slow that it surely had to be part of her dream. She opened her eyes on blue sky and misty mountains. Had she imagined the beat of the Stone Man's heart?

Craning her neck, Ellen met his shadowed gaze. For the first time, she wondered if it would be very difficult to climb higher.

Just above her, a rock spur jutted straight out. She could not see immediately beyond it, but the spur seemed accessible. Rising, stretching herself against the stone, she sought handholds, footholds, and found them, scrambling easily up to straddle the spur. Above, the Stone Man's belly was wrinkled and rough and did not look like a dangerous climb. She tightened her thighs on the spur and rose, slowly, pressing against the rock. Swallowing a sudden giggle, she thought, I'm standing on his penis.

The view altered subtly. A stretch of lower land, invisible from the Stone Man's balls, had suddenly appeared, greener than the surrounding hillsides, a silvery sheet of water in its middle. Ellen felt suddenly disoriented. She let herself sink back down on the stone spur, resting her cheek against rock. She felt hunger, thirst. Perhaps she had slept longer than she had thought. Slowly and carefully, making sure of each foot- and handhold, Ellen began her downward climb.

That night her body was once more her own. Yet she was afraid to touch herself, dreading the thought of Paul's hands. Throbbing softly, she stared through the darkness at the Stone Man's brow.

In her sleep she climbed, and woke silently screaming in midfall. A lone sheep bleated beneath her window, echoing her panic.

Tramping the violet hills, Ellen ranted and cursed at Paul. The destruction of his note had released her carefully hoarded and buried resentment: shouting loudly against the wind, she listed her reasons for hating him, replying to nineteen years of criticism and scorn.

Remembering clearly the many cutting remarks, the unkindness, the gradual undermining of her fragile self-respect, which had, in retrospect, been the essential opposite against which Paul could measure his own worth, she stripped him of dignity and humanity, reducing him to a monster. But she had been married to him. Once, she had thought she loved him. Momentarily uncertain, she quickly remembered his sexual sadism, and was reassured.

She felt cleansed by her hatred. Alone in the hills in the red glow of sunset, she stripped, facing the chill north wind, flaunting her body to the mountains, screaming her defiance. Never again, never again, shall any hands but my own loving ones touch this body. And you, wind, cold though you are, you are welcome.

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To the east she could see the Stone Man's left eye staring at her. She faced him, spreading her arms and legs wide, laughing. Here I am, Stone Man! Take me!

Coming home in the dark, she crept chilled into bed and curled up beneath the quilt.

Tentatively, she clenched her thighs round her fist. Heat slowly filled her. The north wind moaned.

Climbing the Stone Man's belly was easier than Ellen had thought. The shelves and clefts of his wrinkled skin provided her with handholds and footholds and comfortable resting places. The expanse of his chest was smoother, but the central depression of his breastbone contained stony protuberances and thin cracks where dry vegetation grew.

Resting below the Stone Man's massive chin, Ellen surveyed the land. For the first time she realized the Stone Man's true height, the reach of his gaze across hill upon hill, remote blue ranges. From the hollow of his throat, she could see not only the wild mountain landscape but also the far green of planted fields, a pale ribbon of road, small bright boxes of human civilization. The sight made her oddly uneasy.

She had descended, not long ago, to that ribbon of road, to wait for the bus to take her to the nearest shopping center, where she had filled her rucksack with provisions. There had been no problem; the bus had been swift, the supermarket clerk impersonal, the whole experience lasting only a few hours. All the same, she had not felt at ease; she had thought that the other customers, and the passengers on the bus, had been staring behind her back. And several small incidents had reminded her painfully of Paul: the cold gaze of a thin-lipped man; another's abrupt hand propelling the woman with him; a voice raised in anger.

Even on the track uphill, away from the road, she felt watched until she had crossed the ridge into the mountains' embrace, once more safe.

She would eat less, make the food last. Walking the long heather-colored ridges, she ate ripe berries and drank from icy streams. There were edible mosses and fungi, she knew, and she experimented with various combinations, cooking up thick, spotty soups of no particular flavor. Chancing to glance at herself in the old, fly-spotted mirror, Ellen realized that she had lost quite a lot of weight. Still, she felt well, strong from hiking and climbing; her arms and legs were firm and tanned, her body spare and wiry, the way she remembered herself from long ago.

Each morning, she rested her arms on the windowsill and called softly to the Stone Man, wishing him good morning, as she had done as a child.

Whenever she was harassed by memories from her marriage, trapped inside Paul's disapproval, she climbed. The action itself, its demand for

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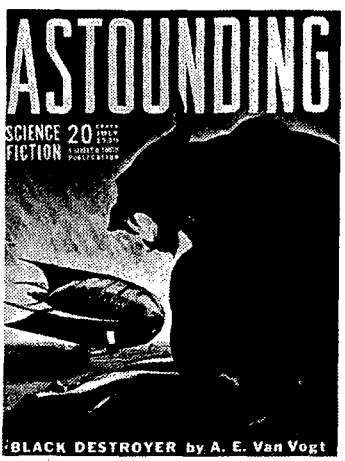

Critics mark this issue as the first "great" issue edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. It contains the first published story, "Black Destroyer," by A.E. van Vogt and the first story by Isaac Asimov to be published in **ASTOUNDING.**

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exacting care and concentration, made her feel competent and in control. And in the Stone Man's timeless presence, she regained a sense of herself.

Sometimes, sprawled on a sunny fold of his belly or resting against his chest, Ellen would murmur to the Stone Man, childishly, confidently sure that he heard her. She did not expect a reply. But there were times when, drowsing against the warm rock, she felt the deep, slow beat of the Stone Man's heart, larghissimo echo of her own rapid human rhythm.

When her food supply dwindled once more, Ellen walked to the ridge overlooking the road and civilization. Hiding there, she waited and watched. The bus came and went; tiny people labored in distant fields, coming and going from their small houses. The sight of them, even so faraway small, did not reassure her. She decided to wait, and eat less.

The cool air held a harsh hint of coming winter. The sun's rays failed to thaw the north wind. But the Stone Man faced into the sun, his visage accumulating its heat. Ellen left her windbreaker at his foot and began climbing.

As always, she paused on his balls, leaning back to enjoy her old, familiar childhood view of cabin and hills, a thin track leading nowhere. She felt safe there, her isolation confirmed, the thread of her life unbroken. On his belly she rested again, this time consciously restricting her view, turning her back on the south, where, she knew, lay the tilled fields of civilization.

Leaning into the hollow of the Stone Man's throat, Ellen did not feel sated, as she normally did at the apex of her climb. Speculatively she eyed his shoulders, sheer slabs of stone hunched high, hiding his ears; she reached up to fondle the point of his chin, just within her reach but equally smooth, without any discernible handholds. Surely, though, there had to be a way up?

Descending a few feet to gain a better view, she studied the Stone Man. His shoulders were clearly inaccessible; however, a deep cleft divided shoulder and chin, and above that the lips, the nostrils, the eyes might provide support for her hands and feet. Hesitatingly, then with increasing confidence, she edged to the left and began ascending the cleft beneath the Stone Man's chin. She was not afraid. Friends did not hurt each other.

Feet balancing on a stony wrinkle, Ellen reached high, hand searching for the petrified mouth. She could feel the vertical cleft of the corner of his bitter lip; if she could reach just a little higher, get a firmer grip, she could lever herself upward and scramble within his grin. Lifting one foot, she stretched. Something gave. Her foot hesitated, clung for an infinitesimal second to sheer rock, then slipped.

Ellen was numb, her flesh icy against warm stone. There was no pain,

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just blackness. The hard rock spur between her thighs, the stone beneath her bruised palms, told her that she was stationary, but she was trapped in vertigo, unsure of up and down and seemingly on the verge of falling. Desperately, she clenched her legs tightly on the stone, pressed her torn fingers into a stony cleft and held on.

Darkness lifted. Beneath her cheek was the Stone Man's flesh. Purple hills stretched before her, familiar and beloved; far away, beyond ridges and fields and water, misty mountain ranges sat solid and unchanging. She knew where she was. The Stone Man held her.

The sun was hot on her head. Carefully she detached one hand from the rock and stared at the blood, the torn skin and exposed flesh. She put her fingers in her mouth. They tasted of salt. Gently she lifted her other arm; shifted slightly, feeling her body echo with countless aches and pains, as if she had been repeatedly twisted and punched by an angry hand. Her chest was sore and it hurt to breathe, but she was whole; she was alive: Ellen, clinging to the Stone Man's penis. It was enough.

When she woke again, the sun was much lower. Her blood had dried, black against pale skin, leaving smudges on the rock. Her hot head throbbed. But she felt steadier, calmer; she thought with sudden longing of cool water and a soft bed, and craned her head slightly, considering the final climb down. She tightened the grip of her thighs. Her left foot searched for support and found it; her right foot moved; pain shot through her, violent and all-encompassing.

The evening sun teased her reluctantly awake. Long shadows stretched across darkening heather, sharply outlining and enlarging the cabin and its shadow tucked into the hillside, far and unreachable. The distant ocean glowed molten gold.

Now that she knew that her foot was crushed, she could feel the remorseless thud of pain up her leg and thigh. Her head seemed distended, echoing loudly each beat of her heart. Yet she was calm. Deep within the warm stone, she felt once more the slow drum of the Stone Man's heart.

She was his; had perhaps always been his. He could not be blamed for her own obtuseness, her reluctance to acknowledge his claim. The violence of her final homecoming was merely a father's chastisement of a beloved daughter. Or was it that of a lover?

"I won't leave you, Stone Man," she sighed against his rough belly. The wind's chill fingers tugged at a tendril of her hair, but the Stone Man was warm. He would hold her.

In the morning, her tongue was hard and swollen with thirst. Face pressed against the Stone Man, she rasped a plea, felt the answering moisture of his skin. Turning her head with extreme care, she licked the

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dew drops from his wrinkles. Her headache was gone, but she felt remote, dull, barricaded behind a wall of indifference. Below her waist, she felt nothing at all.

Her skin contracted against the morning chill of the stone. She stretched her arms wide, palms open, glad of the sun's warm touch.

Dozing, she watched the pictures that flittered through her mind. Her parents, small and far away, were telling her not to play on the rockslide; childhood friends smiled at her, eyes kind but already moving beyond her to new encounters. Her baby cried angrily for attention; guilt stabbed through her, then faded away as a young man kissed her carelessly on the cheek and hurried away without looking back.

Paul appeared. She could see his angry eyes and knew he was berating her for her clumsiness, but she could not hear him through the ringing in her ears. He reached for her and she clung to the Stone Man, feeling safe. She had been claimed; Paul could not reach her. Laughing, she watched him dissolve.

The sun pounded her. Her head was a cauldron of heat. But there was coolness between the Stone Man's skin and her own, where the sun could not reach. She was grateful. When she moved her hands, they encountered hot stone flesh; it became a game to find out how long he took to cool down beneath her touch. But the game tired her.

"You don't mind if I sleep, do you, Stone Man?" she murmured. Against her belly and the palms of her hands, she felt one deep heartbeat.

Day blended into night, into morning. The chill did not trouble her, nor the sun's heat.

All senses turned inward, she clung to the Stone Man. His heartbeat was huge and slow; her own idling rhythms seemed finally closer to his; he had taken her over, and was slowly adjusting her to his own rhythm. Her head felt huge. It could no longer move. Her left arm and hand, the only parts of herself she could see, were distended and angrily red. She had to let go, she knew; she despised her body's weakness, its susceptibility to heat or cold, its dependence; she wanted to be stone instead.

Though her body was broken, she was acutely aware of its weight and textures, its inner workings, its spaces; almost imperceptibly, a nameless process was taking place, boundaries were being eliminated; she was being transformed, and filled. She pressed passionately against the Stone Man, feeling something dark and hot shift within her, rising; the stone pulsed beneath her, her own heartbeat nearly synchronized to its powerful rhythm; slowly, slowly, the ageless erection of stone rose between her petrified thighs, its infinitesimal enlargement filling her with joy. The heat of their mingling flesh grew, filling her, her body bursting with

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pleasure, her heart wanting to race but instead beating slower, slower, in exquisite agony.

The red light of sunset lay gently on her cheek. She slowly opened one eye. It was an exertion. The heavy stone of her head lay immovable against the Stone Man's belly. Idly, she stared at the far mountains, at the sun's dying fire, at her own left hand, which was no longer red but massive and grey, stone upon stone. She could feel it and not feel it; there was no real sensation, only a faint reflection of the sun's last heat and the creeping chill of night. Her stone lips could not smile, but there was no need.

Deep within her, one slow beat echoed the powerful throb of the Stone Man's heart. ●

NEXT ISSUE

In one of those odd coincidences that make editing interesting, two excellent stories with nearly identical—and rather specialized—themes crossed my desk at nearly the same time, and so next month we'll bring you *both* of them. Nebula-winner **John Kessel**'s compelling novella "The Franchise" and **Bruce McCallister**'s compassionate "Southpaw" are both sports stories, both Alternate History stories, and both turn on the same obscure and little-known point of historical fact—and, unlike many Alternate History stories (which are often on the level of "What if Napoleon had had a B-52 and a giant robot companion at Waterloo?" or "Suppose Plato and JFK had formed a rock band and become costumed crimefighters?"), *this* scenario actually *could* have happened, strange as it may seem . . . and, in fact, it very nearly *did* happen. And although both stories share a central character—a world-famous one, seen in a bizarre new role—they are also both very different in mood and plot and ambience, and we think you'll enjoy them both. Play ball!

ALSO IN AUGUST: Bestselling author **Bruce Sterling,** one of our most popular writers, returns to these pages next month after much too long an absence with a hot new novelette called "Deep Eddy," a sizzlingly fast-paced and richly inventive tale of passion, politics, and high-tech intrigue in a turbulent future where the only constant is change; new writer

(Continued on page 83)

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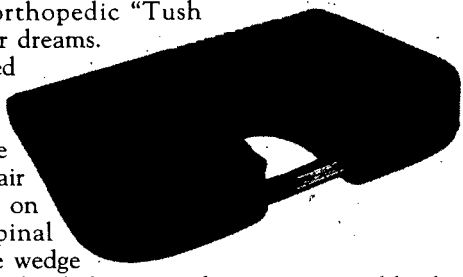

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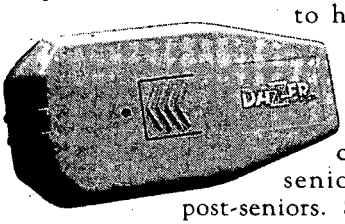

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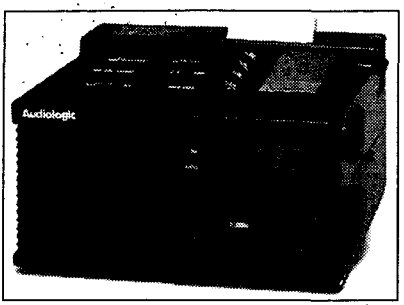
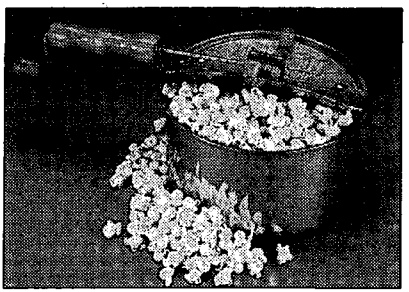


Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audio Logic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the Sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! $89.98 ($6.95) #A2000

GOURMET POPCORN POPPER



The incredible Theater II through-the handle, bottom-stirring popcorn popper uses stovetop power to reach the same temperature (465°F) as commercial poppers. Popcorn explodes to full expansion, steam damage is el-iminated, a faster finish preserves tenderness, and nearly 100% of the popcorn pops! Result: six quarts of the best popcorn you've ever tasted..in just three minutes start to finish. Faster than most microwaves, Wooden handle for a safe grip, and pops with a minimum amount of oil or butter for delicious diet popcorn. (approximately 500 calories per 6 quart). Produces tender, fluffy, old-fashioned movie theater popcorn in just minutes. Made in USA $27.98 ($5.75) #A1963

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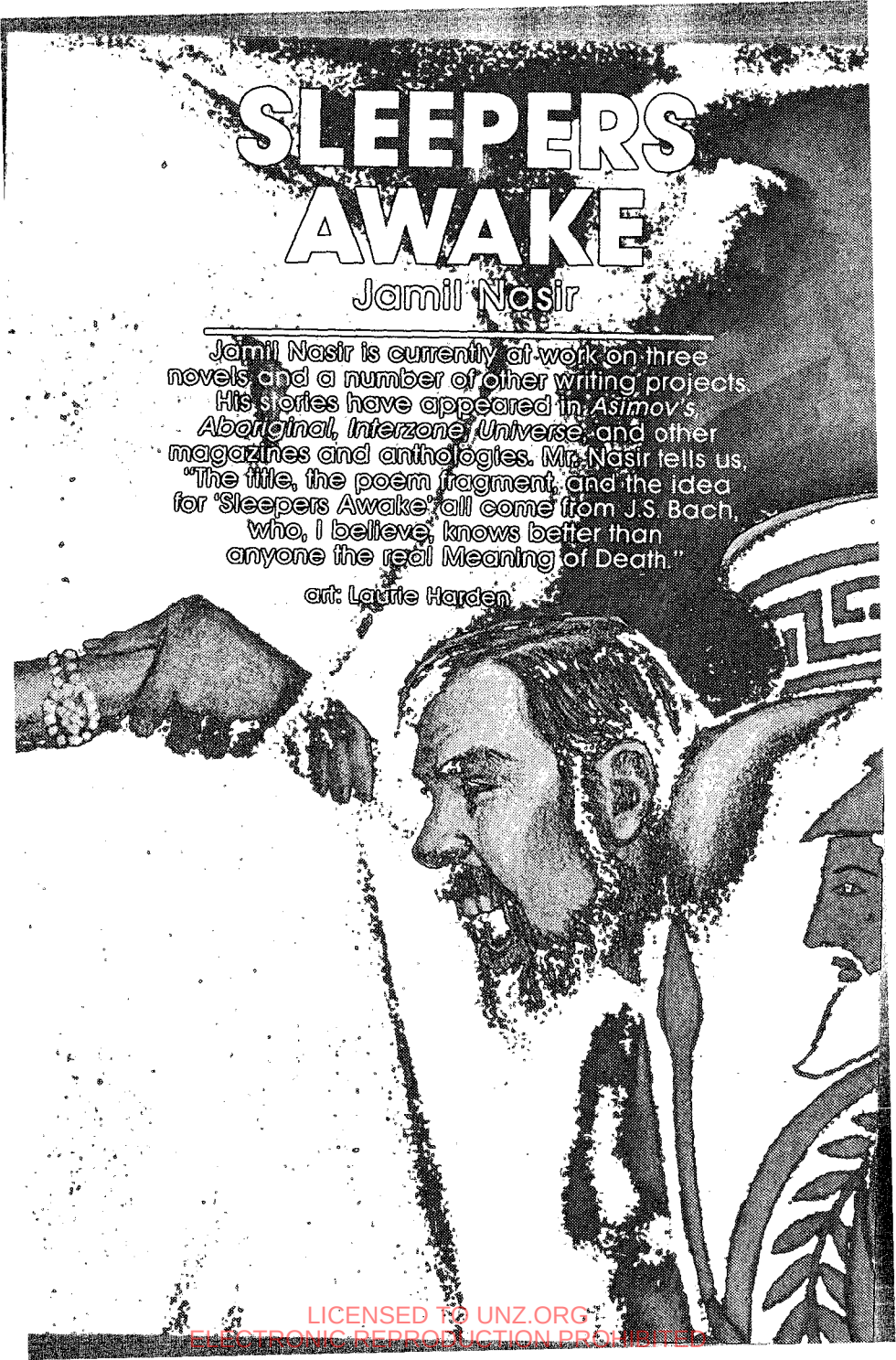
SLEEPERS AWAKE

Jamil Nasir

Jamil Nasir is currently at work on three novels and a number of other writing projects. His stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Aboriginal*, *Interzone*, *Universe*, and other magazines and anthologies. Mr. Nasir tells us, "The title, the poem fragment, and the idea for 'Sleepers Awake' all come from J.S. Bach, who, I believe, knows better than anyone the real Meaning of Death."

art: Laurie Harden



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It all started with a flash.

It had been a mild October Sunday, yellow leaves fluttering down against a blue sky, the barking of a neighborhood dog and the tang of wood smoke coming faintly on the still air, warm enough to sit on your back deck all day. I had sat on mine till evening, reading, dozing, and watching the light turn long and yellow, then blue. Even when it got chilly and too dark to follow my spy book, where a beautiful girl in a parking garage was begging the hero to help her escape from terrorists, I didn't want to go in. I was leaning my chair against the cool brick of the house, listening to the trilling of crickets and an occasional car down on Thayer Avenue, when it came: a split-second of flashbulb blue piercing the neighborhood like an X-ray.

My chair thumped down on four legs. Another chair scraped back in the kitchen. Vicki slid the glass door open, a magazine in her hand. "What was that?"

We went and stood by the deck railing. The evening air was still and deep, two early stars shining through the branches of our backyard oak.

The screen door next door slammed and Mrs. Romer's old, hoarse voice said: "Going to rain, I imagine."

"There aren't any clouds," said Vicki.

"What?"

"There aren't any clouds. It wasn't lightning," Vicki yelled.

"Maybe an electric short in the circuit box down the street. Big one Somebody ought to call the electric company," I told Vicki.

I got her to go in and call. I stood looking up into the darkness, crickets rippling the silence softly. Three houses down, Cindy Lipman stood in her back yard holding her baby, face a white blur looking up into the air.

"You can bet it's some kind of bad weather, anyhow," said Mrs. Romer sourly, and went back inside, screen door slamming behind her.

Looking up through the branches of the oak, I thought I heard, very faintly, the ringing of tiny bells blending with the crickets' song.

Vicki came back out. "The line's busy. Probably a lot of people—"

"Listen," I hissed.

"What?"

I strained my ears. The ringing seemed to have retreated back into my imagination.

But that night, on the edge of sleep, I thought I heard it again, sweet and distant, very faint.

"You hear that?" I whispered to Vicki.

"Mmm?"

"Bells."

Pause.

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"Go to sleep."

II

Things were screwed up at work the next day. For one thing, the phones were broken. I had an important call to make to Syracuse, New York, but I kept getting whistling and crackling noises instead. The operator wouldn't answer. I finally told Rose to report it to the office manager, and spent the rest of the morning talking into my dictaphone. When I got back from lunch, Rose had the transcription on my chair. I put my feet on the desk with a contented sigh, uncapped a red pen, turned back the cover sheet, and read:

Sleepers Awake
Sleepers awake, the voice is calling,
On battlements the watchmen cry:
Wake, city of Jerusalem! . . .

The telephone rang. I groped for it.

"Bill Johnson, please," said a faraway, staticky voice.

"You have the wrong number."

"This isn't Johnson's Formal Wear in Des Moines, Iowa?"

I said no, hung up, and buzzed Rose, handed her the memo as the phone rang again.

"Bill Johnson, please," said a faraway, staticky voice.

I hung up. Rose was staring at the memo blankly. "That's funny. Something must be wrong with the word-processing system. I'll try to . . ."

The phone rang. I answered it, watching her out of the office suspiciously.

"Bill Johnson? Of Des Moines, Iowa?"

"No, Bob Wilson, of Washington, D.C., the same guy you've gotten the last half-dozen times."

"Sorry about that, Mr. Wilson. Tom Gibbs from New York City. I'm in Formal Wear. How are the phones down your way?"

"Screwed up."

"Same here. I've been trying to get through to Des Moines all morning. Seems like the trunk lines are out of whack. I can get Washington, Boston, Chicago, and L.A. okay, but the farm lands don't answer. Funny."

The phone rang once more that afternoon. I picked it up, expecting Tom Gibbs, but it wasn't Tom Gibbs; it was a wide, distant hum, a faint gabble of ten thousand crossed lines overlaid with the electronic buzz of

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some vast malfunction, like a telephone call from Entropy itself. I hung up with a shiver and a quick prayer that It didn't intend to come visit in person.

III

I was in a bad mood when I got home.

"Where's the newspaper?" I complained, after searching the living room for it. "You didn't throw it away again, did you?"

"It didn't come," Vicki called from upstairs. "I left you some green beans on the stove."

"Green beans?" I went and looked at them mournfully.

"I've got rehearsal, honey." She came downstairs, beautiful in a blue skirt and pink, floppy sweater, eyes vivid with makeup, gave me a barely touching kiss that wouldn't smear her lipstick. "And when I get back we have to go over to Mrs. Romer's. She swears she has ghosts. I promised we'd come and make sure there aren't any. I think she's gone crazy, poor old lady."

"Ghosts? Honey, I don't want to go over there tonight. I'm tired. You wouldn't believe—"

In the back yard, crickets trilled in subtly shifting patterns, the air still and just a little damp. Moonlight cast a dark deck shadow on the grass. I was leaning on the railing before going back inside to my spy book, when I heard the faint, sweet sound of bells.

I held my breath. The lights of Vicki's car had just disappeared down the hill. The sound seemed to be coming from around the side of the house.

I tiptoed down wooden steps and through crackling leaves, poked my head past the gutter downspout at the corner.

High in a young maple in Arland Johnston's side yard, unseasonable firefly lights floated.

I snuck forward, the soft earth of iris beds silencing my steps. For a second it crossed my mind that Arland had hung out Christmas lights: I thought I saw tiny haloed saints and angels with trumpets. Then they all winked out at once.

I stood looking up into the tree, lit pale by the moon. As I watched, a single leaf let go and fluttered down. Then I heard the bells again, faint and faraway.

The firefly lights were floating around a tree in old Mr. Jakeway's back yard, down at the bottom of the street.

I crept across silent asphalt that was moon-tinted the same deep, dusty blue as the sky, along the sidewalk in tree-shadows, pushed through a

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hole in Mr. Jakeway's hedge, getting scratched and poked. I picked my way through his quarter-acre back yard, trying to tell clumps of weeds from junk auto parts that could break your leg in the dark. Gnarled tree-branches hung almost to the ground.

A cobra blur coiled around my leg and yanked me into the air.

I tried to scream, but only a faint gurgling came out. I hung upside down, breath knocked out of me, spinning slowly, arms and free leg struggling wildly in the air.

The rope around my ankle jerked. There were grunts from above, and I started going up again, slowly. Hands took hold of me and pulled me onto a thick tree-branch four stories off the ground.

An old man squatted on the branch. For a second I thought he was Mr. Jakeway, but then I saw that he was even older, with a sour, wrinkled face, and no hair. He wore a long, dingy robe that the moon lit grey, with big buttons down the front. He peered at me through wire-rimmed spectacles. Around him crouched half a dozen kids in their early teens, watching me solemnly. Three of them held me onto the branch.

The old man croaked: "I am the Angel of Death."

I stared at him. Then I did something I would never have expected: I started to cry. I could see our house far below, yard awash in pale leaves, my old Datsun parked in front, a bag of newspapers on the walk waiting for the recycling truck. I had never seen the neighborhood from up here; already it looked faraway and out of reach, like a picture of someplace you used to live but will never see again.

"Please stop crying," said the old man irritably. "I'm not going to take you yet. At least, not if you promise to stop poking around where you have no business. We're having enough trouble right now without you."

I wiped my shirtsleeve across my nose hopefully.

"Do you promise to stop snooping? To leave those little lights alone? And not to tell anyone about us?"

I nodded eagerly. One of the teenage kids looped the end of the rope they had pulled off my ankle around my chest.

"See that you don't," the old man croaked as they lowered me rotating toward the earth. "If you do—"

When I reached the ground, I struggled out of the rope and ran blindly until I was inside my house, locked the door, drew all the curtains, and dialed 911.

It took them a long time to answer. After I had given my name and address, I said: "There's a weirdo in a tree at the end of my block who claims he's the Angel of Death. He's got some kids with him. They've got a rope snare rigged up that almost broke my back. This guy is dangerous, officer—if you could see his face—"

"Angel of Death—up in a tree—rope snare—" the heavy voice on the

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other end repeated slowly; obviously he was writing it down. "And what address would this be at, Mr. Wilson?"

"It's the first house on your right as you turn onto Thayer Place. I don't know the exact address. You're sending somebody right over?"

"It'll probably be half an hour, Mr. Wilson, before we can get to it. We've—"

"Half an *hour?* Officer, there's a dangerous maniac—"

"If you'll let me finish, Mr. Wilson, we've got thirty other emergency calls, and we just don't have the cars to cover them. I suggest you stay inside and keep your doors locked until we can get out there, but I wouldn't panic. The other wild calls we've had tonight have turned out to be hoaxes."

"This isn't a hoax!"

"I didn't say it was, sir. But look, we've got a report of a giant lizard prowling around Sligo Creek—ate somebody's dog, says here. We've got a report of a *mushroom cloud* over on Colesville Road. We've got ghosts all over town. We figure it's one of these kids' Dungeons and Dragons clubs or some people very confused about when Halloween is, so I wouldn't get too concerned. Just stay inside until the officer gets there."

As soon as I put down the phone, a scream sounded faintly from next door.

I spent a minute that felt like an hour chewing the end off my thumb. I figured the Angel of Death guy and his kids were murdering Mrs. Romer. I wondered what I should do about that.

Another scream.

I banged out along leaf-deep sidewalks. All of Mrs. Romer's windows were lit and her front door was ajar. Mrs. Romer herself was standing in the middle of her small, well-furnished living room, wrinkled hands on her hips, looking around with solemn belligerence.

"He's back," she announced in her hoarse voice as I stopped in the doorway. "Him and his alcoholic mother and his sponging sister."

"Who?" I yelled, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

"Terrell."

"I—I thought he was dead."

"It was such a relief to me. I learned to love him afterward; he left me this house and a lot of money, God bless him. But he's back. Him and his alcoholic, sponging family."

"Mrs. Romer, I've got a terrible emergency—"

"You look in the basement," she told me. "I'll go upstairs. If we can't find them, we'll have to look in the attic."

And she started up the stairs, yelling quaveringly: "Terrell! Terrell! You come out right now!"

It took me awhile to get her calmed down. She wouldn't let me leave

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until I had crawled around in her attic, poking a flashlight into dusty, cobwebbed corners. Maybe I didn't hurry as much as I could have; with the Angel of Death guy prowling the neighborhood, Mrs. Romer's attic felt comfortably remote and full of dark hiding places. Thankfully, I didn't find her dead in-laws crouching in any of them. When I peeked out her front door twenty minutes later, I was relieved to see the red and blue lights of a police car rotating silently at the end of the street.

I walked down to where a policeman and old Mr. Jakeway stood by a purring squad car, the mist of their breath rising into blue depths where the moon shone mistily. Another policeman was crashing around in the brush behind Mr. Jakeway's house, shining a flashlight up into the trees.

"Hey there, Bobby," said Mr. Jakeway. "Officer here tells me you saw some kids up in my trees."

"An old man and some kids. But that was an hour ago."

"Well, they're gone now," said the policeman.

"Officer, I know it sounds strange, but they were there. They pulled me—"

"You're not the only report we have on them," said the policeman, looking at a clipboard with his flashlight. "At least the old man. We got a call over on Pershing Drive, an old man fitting that description trampling through people's flower beds. Went off in a big foreign car, says here."

"You think they're foreigners? Terrorists?" asked Mr. Jakeway, thrusting his old, grizzled head forward.

"I don't know what they are. We've gotten a lot of strange calls tonight, is all I know."

"Psychological warfare, maybe," said Mr. Jakeway, nodding and looking into our eyes one at a time. "Could be. You never know what they're inventing in those laboratories. Some kind of gas, maybe, makes you see people up in trees when there aren't any."

The other policeman crashed out of the bushes, looking scratched and out of breath.

"You ought to cut down some of those weeds back there," he told Mr. Jakeway.

IV

I had left the house door open; it spilled a rectangle of light onto the front walk in the still, cricket-trilled air, and I could hear the phone ringing half a block away as I walked back up from Mr. Jakeway's.

I rushed in and answered it.

It was Vicki. "Bob? Hi."

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She never calls me "Bob" unless somebody is listening. In the background I could hear music and voices.

"I'm going to be a little late tonight. Something wonderful has happened."

"Where are you? Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I'm at rehearsal. Honey, you'll never guess what happened."

"Are you coming home? There's some weird things—"

"I'm going to be a little late. Honey, there was a producer at rehearsal tonight. None of us knew it. Stuart introduced us afterward. His name is Ken, and he's doing a show at the Kennedy Center in March. And he *signed me up for a part.* With *Tim Curry.*"

"That's great, honey, great! But I wish you'd come home, because—"

"Honey? The line's getting staticky. We're going out to celebrate and sign the contract. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you fine—"

"Hello? Bob? Oh, he's gone," she said disappointedly to someone at her end, and hung up.

Aside from a few distant crackles, the phone was dead.

I got my keys, locked the front door behind me. The gas station at Dale and Piney Branch glared with white neon, self-serve customers dawdling over their hoses. Overfed diners tottered out the door of the Chesapeake Crab House. I pointed the Datsun toward town. Half an hour later I was banging on the locked door of the Souris Studio storefront on 14th Street, cupping my hands on the glass to peer into a dim entrance area with a coatrack, a few shabby chairs, and a display stand for theater programs, but no people. I stood in the smoky, run-down darkness trying to imagine where one would go to celebrate a contract. Then I walked back to the parking garage.

My car was on the third sublevel. I went down urine-smelling concrete steps, crossed the oil-stained, neon-lit ramp. I had the door unlocked when a voice behind me said: "Can you give me a ride?"

The ramp had been deserted a second before. "No," I said, and yanked the door open.

"Please. Someone is following me. Please."

That made me turn and look.

She was small, slim, with fashionably tousled blonde hair, breathtaking dark eyes. She wore black tights, a black leather jacket, little pink ballerina shoes. Her face was wild, lips trembling. She came closer between the cars.

"Please," she said.

The heavy throb of an engine echoed down the ramp, and her pupils dilated crazily. Her breath came in tearing gasps.

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Déjà vu. I moved away from the car door with a quick gesture. She scrambled to the floor of the passenger seat and crouched there, head down.

I got in, backed out of my space, and headed up the ramp. At the first turn I had to edge past a black Mercedes limo coming down. I edged close enough to see through the tinted glass of the back seat.

An old man with a bald, wrinkled face sat there. He wore a grey robe with big buttons, wire-rimmed spectacles. He didn't see me; his eyes were straining through the windshield as if looking for something.

My heart pounded. I paid the garage attendant in his cubicle of light with a shaking hand.

We were rattling over potholes on 14th Street before the woman said: "You know him." She was staring up at me.

"I'm going to call the police."

She laughed shortly. "The police," she sneered. She threw herself into the passenger seat. "Take a right here. You can use my phone."

As we drove it began to rain. A few minutes later, turning down 22nd Street, I suddenly had the feeling that I was leaving behind everything familiar to me, my whole life.

A few blocks down 22nd, I pulled over by a brick building with wide front steps between worn stone lions, brass-and-glass entrance doors glittering with chandelier light. The building elevator was elderly but highly polished. The third floor hall was silent, lit discreetly by brass leaves with bulbs behind them, carpeted in a red floral pattern. The woman unlocked a door near the end, locked and bolted it behind us.

"Phone's over there," she said, her hand a pale blur in the dark. She hurried into another room.

Rain pattered on the sills of open windows, and the glare of streetlight showed black and white outlines of magazines, clothes, and dishes scattered over deep chairs and a sofa, low glass-and-metal tables. Shelves held powerful stereo components, books, and vases. Shadowy art prints hung on the walls.

The woman was opening and closing drawers in the other room. She hadn't turned on any lights. I dialed 911 on a telephone shaped like a banana. It was busy.

"You have a phone book?" I called.

"Somewhere." She sounded preoccupied.

A phone book-sized binder lay on a table at the end of the sofa; but when I opened it, I found myself looking at an eight-by-ten glossy photograph of her wearing only a gold necklace, her delicate, muscular body stretched out on a bed. I closed the book with a snap. From where I stood I could see out the window.

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The woman's voice said behind me: "Look, I need a ride somewhere. It's a matter of life and death. Can you help me?"

"No," I said. "Not yet."

She came around the sofa. She was wearing a white plastic raincoat over a white dress and white stockings, carrying an overnight bag. I held her so she wouldn't get too near the window. Streetlight glow lit her face silver-grey.

A black Mercedes limousine was parked across the street.

"Oh my God," she whispered. She started to shake.

I got her by both wrists, whispering: "Shh." I was imagining the Angel of Death and his chauffeur listening in the hall outside.

"No!" she screamed in a sudden frenzy. "No!" She tried to wrench her wrists away from me.

I wrapped my left hand around her face, pinioned her arms with my right, and dragged her struggling into the next room. One of her blue rubber boots kicked off and hit the wall. I crushed her down on a big, unmade bed, held a pillow over her head to muffle her screams. After awhile, lack of air made her quiet.

I took the pillow away enough to say in her ear: "Maybe they don't know we're here."

She lay still.

I helped her sit up. Her face was red, swollen, wet, her breath gasping with sobs. I put my finger to my lips and crept back into the living room, listened at the front door. The elevator opened once, but voices and footsteps went away in another direction. There was no other sound. I tried the telephone. There were only buzzing and crackling noises on it now. I sat down against the wall behind the front door, my ears straining against the patter of rain and the sound of traffic.

After a long time I peered out the window again. Streetlight glittered on wet pavement. The black limo was gone.

The woman was asleep in her coat, one boot on, her face calm and intent like a child's. She woke with a start when I touched her.

"They're gone," I told her. My voice seemed to come from far off somewhere. I had started to shake.

She looked up into my face for a minute. Then she began fumbling with the buttons on her dress, breath quickening.

V

I woke up next to her after midnight, exhausted. Her skin seemed to glow faintly in the dark, as if there was a light inside her.

I lay and watched her. Gradually she woke up too.

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When she was awake, I said: "I don't understand what's happening."

She propped herself up, sitting against the head of the bed, got a cigarette from the night table. Tendrils of smoke curled around her pale hair, pale shoulders.

"You're dead," she said.

I didn't say anything to that.

"Everybody's dead. Everybody at once," she went on. "All together. Whoosh. A wholesale global disaster, Sunday evening about five-thirty. You might have seen a flash or felt a sharp pain. I won't tell you what it was, since it's no longer your business, but almost a billion people died in the first half-hour, and more are coming in all the time.

"Almost nobody noticed. But now you're starting to notice. Now your comfortable consensual reality is starting to break down, to be rebuilt by more powerful forces: desires, obsessions, fears."

I got out of bed. I felt dizzy.

"I have to go," I said. "Home."

"You don't have a home anymore. Just a blackened spot on a tiny piece of dust buzzing around a spark of light in a far corner of the universe. And a dream image that could vanish any second. You might as well stay here." She smiled, letting a wisp of smoke curl out through her lips.

"I can't," I said thickly, hunting for my underwear in the pile of clothes by the bed. "My wife—"

VI

By the time I turned the Datsun onto Thayer Place, it had stopped raining. Untidy maple branches looming over the front walk in the dark dripped on the limp, waterlogged bag of newspapers. I was heading shakily for the front door when there were steps behind me on the sidewalk.

A bent figure was jogging painfully up the hill. I stumbled backward, the adrenaline of fear flashing through me, but it was only Mr. Jakeway, unshaven jowls wagging, sunken eye-sockets filled with shadow.

"Bobby," he rasped. His thin, trembling hands took hold of my shoulders and he leaned on me, breathing hard. "Have they got you too? Or are you awake?" His breath smelled faintly alcoholic.

Before I could answer he went on: "They're lying, Bobby. Nothing's happened. Nobody's *dead*. Don't believe 'em, boy." He leaned on me harder, put his arm around my shoulder. "They want us to move aside. Just move aside and give up. They're using some kind of gas. Black gas. Thank goodness I found you, Bobby," he said hoarsely. "Everybody else is walking around in a dream."

I stared at the glitter of his eyes in the dark. I felt strange.

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"Who?" I finally blurted out. "Who?"

"I don't know *who*," he whispered hoarsely. "But they're not from here. Aliens, maybe. I seen them walking through the streets, spraying black gas. We've got to do something, Bobby, before they—"

"Somebody told me it was a worldwide disaster—" I stammered miserably.

"That's what *they* say! That's *their* story! But it's a *lie*, Bobby. They want us to—"

"So what do we—what do we *do?*"

The question seemed to agitate him. "We have to wake up the others! We have to wake everybody up! Quick! Where's your wife? I'll go after Arland. Come on!"

His panic infected me. I ran up the walk to our front door.

The living room—tidy and familiar, yellowish light from the floor lamp by the couch throwing familiar shadows—turned my panic into cold, jittery sweat.

"Vicki?" I called.

No answer.

Out the window, Mrs. Romer's brightly lit kitchen caught my eye. Something was going on in there.

A man and a woman sat at a table by the kitchen window, talking tensely. I couldn't hear what they were saying. The woman looked vaguely like Mrs. Romer, but young, with an obsolete hairdo. The man was unshaven, jowly, tired-looking.

There was a muffled scream, and the woman dived across the table and buried a paring knife in the tired-looking man's forehead. They tumbled down out of sight, the woman screaming wildly.

My heart pounded. A darkness came over my eyes. I sat down heavily on the couch.

When I started to think again, I was exhausted, drained, too tired even to see clearly: the wall, floor lamp, and coffee table next to me looked fuzzy, translucent, unreal.

Voices, laughter, and footsteps were approaching along the front walk. The front door flew open and a dozen people came in. As they did, the living-room changed. The walls turned from blue to peach and fled outward in a long, curving line; the hardwood floor became plush blond carpet and sagged to shape a huge sunken living-room with grand piano, Chinese screens, round, furry chairs and sofas, dark lacquered cabinets, soft lighting, tropical plants. My body felt peculiarly stiff. I looked down with difficulty. All I could see of myself was a large Chinese vase displayed on a carved stand.

The people who piled through the arched, oak front door looked too grown-up to be carrying on the way they were. The men wore tuxedos

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with flowers in the lapels, the women glittery outfits that seemed to be half evening gown, half bikini. They were all young and beautiful. They crowded, laughing, chattering, and squealing, up a wide, curved staircase.

I was still too tired to move, so I sat numbly for another few minutes, until two people came back down the stairs. Music and merrymaking sounds came faintly from above.

The two people, a man and a woman, leaned on the grand piano not more than a stone's throw from me. The man was broad-shouldered and tall, with the kind of face Michelangelo used to carve out of marble, hair curling carelessly over his collar. He gazed at the woman as if there was nothing else to see in the world.

She was my wife. A little bigger in some places, a little smaller in others than I remembered her, dark ringlets thicker, the West Virginia jawline trimmed down some, but unmistakably Victoria Wilson. She was wearing a tight, slithery dress of gold sequins that showed off most of one leg and that I had to admit looked great, even though it was embarrassing the hell out of me.

I tried to stand up and make a fuss. I couldn't move or talk.

"You haven't given me your answer, darling," murmured the man, gazing down at her. She was gazing at him too, in a way I didn't like. "You can't leave me hanging like this. Please . . ."

"How *can* I answer? How can I even *think* right now, Billy? Everything is so wonderful! I feel as if I'm in heaven!" She put her drink on the piano and kicked off her high heels. "Do you think it's a dream? An Oscar nomination, a box-office smash—"

"And all because of you," he said. "You made that film what it is. Without you it would have been nothing."

"Oh, Billy—"

He drew her close in his strong arms, crushing her to him with barely controlled passion, and as their lips touched a shudder went through him.

"Hey!" I managed to yell in outrage.

I thought Vicki glanced at me, but the man didn't seem to hear.

"It's funny," he said when they were done slobbering on each other. He seemed ready to cry. "Here I am, the most powerful man in Hollywood—I really thought I had it made. Any woman in the world would do anything to get in my next picture. But the one I really want—the one I *must* have—won't have me."

He knelt down in front of her, looking up with imploring eyes.

"Please," he whispered. "Please . . ."

"Oh, brother!" I groaned.

"Will you shut *up*?" Vicki screamed at me, stamping her foot. "What

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are you doing here? I didn't come snooping around your stupid, corny private eye scene with that slut, did I? Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

Her rage hit me like a wave. Everything turned fuzzy and translucent again, Vicki and the Hollywood producer like ghosts with lights glowing inside them. The producer didn't seem to have noticed Vicki yelling—he stood up and took her in his arms again. And as they kissed, something funny happened: the light inside Vicki seemed to flicker and go dim, while the light inside the producer got stronger, as if he had drawn some of her light into himself.

And there was something else—someone I hadn't noticed before, sitting on a distant love seat, half hidden by a dwarf palm, hands clasped patiently over his long grey robe, wire-rimmed glasses patiently watching the oblivious lovers.

I struggled, trying to shout a warning, but I couldn't move or make a sound.

Ghostly music played. Vicki and the producer started to dance, close and slow, gradually swaying over near where I sat stiff and dumb. Soon the producer's tuxedoed bottom swayed languidly in front of my face. I lunged forward with all my strength, and bit it desperately hard. He screamed and jumped out of her arms, whirling in astonishment and rubbing himself.

Vicki's face was ugly with rage as she kicked me off my stand to shatter against the wall.

VII

I stood in the trough of a mountain in heavy night rain, showing my thumb to Interstate traffic that made a pale ribbon through murky darkness up the mountain's shoulder. Every few minutes lightning struck the summit, lighting wooded hills and sending out a crackling boom. I wore an old army surplus poncho, I was seventeen, the rain was warm, and the crowded, lonely highway made me feel somehow alive, vital, like a sailor on an uncharted ocean. When a little white car pulled out of traffic up the shoulder, I ran, lugging my knapsack, and climbed into the front seat next to a girl.

She was slender and young, wearing jeans and a floppy sweater, tousled blonde hair falling to her shoulders, dark eyes that flashed at me, then watched the mirror for an opening in traffic. Her pale hair and skin seemed to glow in the dark.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

It seemed strange that I couldn't remember. To hide my confusion, I

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pulled the poncho off over my head, getting water on the front seat. I felt the car accelerate.

"Okay," she said softly. "Come and say goodbye."

We climbed the mountain toward the storm, which now sent out a flash and a boom.

High up, the highway was bordered by jutting boulders and pines, the mountaintop bulking black in the gloom. At a sign that said "Authorized Vehicles Only," the girl jerked the steering wheel to the right and we were climbing a rutted track among the boulders, the lights of the highway abruptly left behind. Pine trees swayed and moaned in the rain and wind, dead leaves whirled and scattered before our lights. There was a blinding flash that seemed to obliterate everything, and a splitting bang that shook the mountain.

The track turned steeply up, and the little car's engine strained, its wheels spinning. At last we came to a slope it wouldn't climb. The girl killed the engine and lights and we got out into wet, rushing air that smelled of ozone and scorched rock. My skin prickled with electricity. Not far above, black clouds roiled, muttering heavily.

She was a pale blur scrambling through high grass that bent hissing in the wind. I scrambled up the slope after her.

Something loomed above me: a huge rock cropping out of the very top of the mountain. She was climbing it.

"Hey!" I yelled, laughing. "This is crazy! We've got to get out of here!" The storm scattered my words. I started after her, fingers straining on narrow holds, tennis-shoes slipping on wet rock, wind and rain tearing at me blindingly. When I reached the top, I was gasping.

The girl was naked, standing on the topmost pinnacle of rock, arching her body upward, straining her hands toward the clouds and moaning. The rock steamed, and the smell of burning and electricity was strong.

The glow of her skin reminded me of something. I stood at the edge of the rock, suddenly trembling, dizzy chasms of wind rushing below me.

"Don't be afraid," said the girl. "We're here to help you. To smooth your way from this world to the next."

"No," I whimpered.

But somehow I knew it was what I had always wanted.

I pulled off my clothes, throwing them out into the blackness. The rock was hot and charred under my feet.

I reached for the girl's upstraining body.

A livid blue spark jumped between us, lighting for a second her white skin, her crazy eyes, the hair standing out from her head like a silver mane. Then she was clawing at me, pulling me desperately to her, and we wrestled, standing, kneeling, and lying, until the mountain seemed to rock thundering on the roots of the world.

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There was an enormous flash that cut the flesh from us in an instant, and I was illuminated from within: I saw our bodies flaming in the rushing air, and all the cracks and straining strength of rock under us, pushed up to the air from the liquid searing center of the earth, saw the live green things that crept and grew over the mountain toward the light, pushing upward by millimeters even in that second, saw birds huddled in their nests in swaying branches, saw animals crouching in their holes, a little river frothing at the foot of the mountain, and all rivers running to the oceans, the whales gliding silent and deep through the cold blue oceans, birds singing over the nests of their young in the evening, saw a young man leaning on a bridge in the evening, staring down into quiet water.

And as the vision faded and I plunged through darkness like a dying spark from a Fourth of July rocket, I saw, seated in the midst of everything, an old, old man in a grey robe, hands folded patiently on his stomach.

VIII

. . . a fresh October day with pale blue sky, yellow leaves fluttering down. I was sitting on my back deck, so tired that it was an effort to breathe, to hold my head up, so tired that the long yellow sunlight seemed aged and brittle, the breeze cold. Vicki sat in the chair next to mine, head bowed, hands lying useless in her lap like an old woman's.

Slow footsteps came along the flagstones at the side of the house, with a heavy *clunk*, as if whoever walked there leaned on a staff. The footsteps climbed the wooden steps, and an old man came into view. He was tall and stooped in his grey robe, bald, wrinkled face grave and thoughtful.

He stood looking down at us for a few minutes. Then he intoned in a strong, old voice: "The first seed of Life is desire. Life is the unwinding of desire, like the unwinding of a spring. When desire is burned away, the next world comes.

"I sent you images, reflections of your own desires, to help you to the next world."

Then a profound blue light shone from him, dimming the sun, and it was as if his body had turned inside out, had become hollow—had become an opening or doorway in the air of our back yard through which blue light shone from some other place, where I thought I could see stars. Flanking the door were two tall, shining figures in chain mail, leaning on heavy spears.

Then they and the door and the old man were gone.

A haze had come over the afternoon sun, making the sky pale. Mist

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was creeping through the bushes at the bottom of the garden. Birds sang and fluttered on the old grape arbor in Mrs. Romer's back yard. I was too tired to move, or even think, almost too tired to watch the mist roll in silently, softening the outlines of trees down on Thayer Avenue. After awhile the yellow leaves of our oak dripped with it, and the sky had turned twilight grey. The few sleepy songs of birds were muffled in the still air.

Fog thickened, so now I could only see halfway down the hill. Mrs. Romer's grape arbor began to slip out of sight. My hand had somehow gotten locked with Vicki's, but I couldn't turn to look at her. A surf, invisible in the fog, seemed to roll under us now, as if the ocean washed around the foundations of the house. Soon I could only see the horizontal bar of the deck railing in the mist, and the oak tree's shadow leaning over us as soft grey silence closed around.

My eyes were heavy and my chin drooped to my chest, but somewhere, maybe deep inside, someone seemed to be shaking me gently and saying "wake up, wake up."

Then I fell asleep. ⊙

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 63)

Sonia Orin Lyris makes an impressive *Asimov's* debut with a story that explores the razor's edge between fantasy and reality, and between love and betrayal, our August cover story, "A Hand in the Mirror"; the ingenious **Phillip C. Jennings** returns with a sly new twist on the Afterlife, in "Precarnation"; new writer **Valerie J. Freireich** makes a powerful *Asimov's* debut with a look at alien-human relations from a disturbing *new* perspective, in "The Prodigy"; **Sharon N. Farber** returns to offer us some wry and funny "Advice"; and new writer **Michael H. Payne**, making *his Asimov's* debut, takes us to a strange and distant world populated with some very odd and exotic characters, for an evocative and dangerous quest to find the enigmatic "River Man." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstands on June 22, 1993.

COMING SOON: major new stories by **Terry Bisson, Michael Swanwick, Connie Willis, Ian R. MacLeod, William Tenn, Nancy Kress, S.P. Somtow,** and many more.

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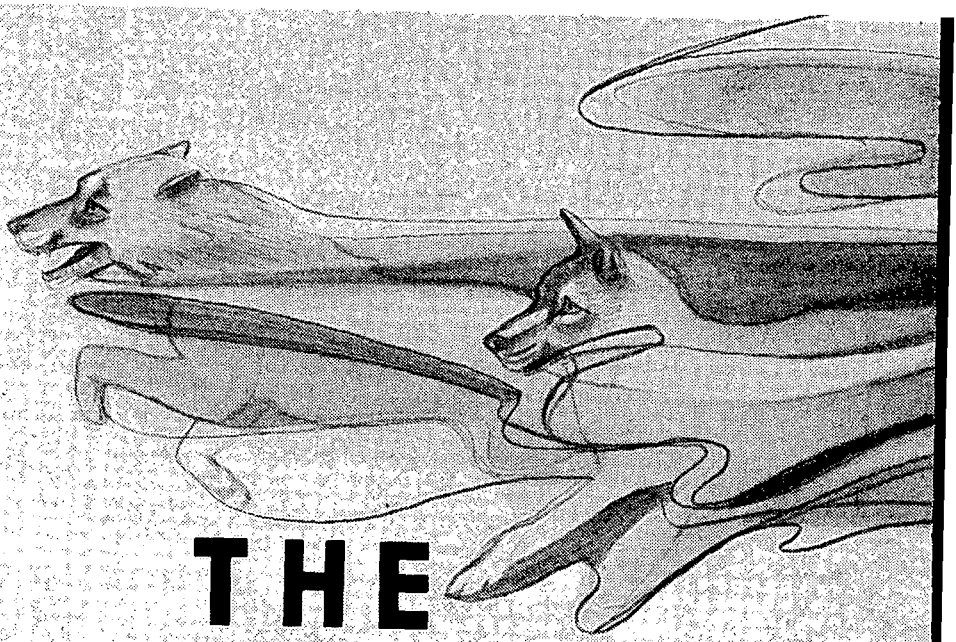

THE RAIN STONE

Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum tells us, "It seems that I'm not finished with the Dryland stories after all. Which is not too surprising, I suppose, as we conclude our seventh consecutive year of drought, here in Oregon. A friend called from Idaho a few weeks ago, to inform me that several miles of Snake River had been pumped completely dry by irrigators faced with upcoming water restrictions."
"The Rain Stone" is a prequel to "Stairway," the dramatic novella that appeared in our May 1993 issue.

art: Carol Heyer

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Rosemarie shifted her pack higher on her shoulders as she clambered up the creekbed. Below, the desert floor blurred to a haze of tan that stretched out to the rim of the world. The sea must look a lot like that, Rosemarie thought. Only blue, not brown. The herd of stocky little goats browsing along the flat looked like gray foam on the desert–sea.

The Caravan had set up the first herding camp at the base of the creekbed, where they always did. Sun flashed from the black wings of the solar panels on the truckbed campers, trailers and battered RVs that housed the seven Caravan families. The water-tanker stood in the center of the loose circle, because water was at the center of *everything*. The tanker was still full, because they were only a week out of Malheur. And anyway, it was spring, and the goats could even find a little water in the old creekbeds up here on the rim. Water didn't really get to be a bad problem until the other side of the circle—after they'd gone around the bottom of the Alvord desert, and up along the Owyhee. By then, it would be full summer and everything would be dry. That's when the grownups would start knocking on the tanker's metal sides, figuring head-count and miles to the Snake River Aquifer at Nyssa. That's when you couldn't get drinks between meals, and you were *always* thirsty.

Even thinking about those hot days made Rosemarie thirsty, and she shrugged her pack off her shoulders. She only had two jugs in her pack, not the three she usually carried.

Because she had snuck out.

The anger balled up in her belly again, hot and hard as a clenched fist. *You're getting too old to go out herding*. Her mother had uttered those shocking words as she scrubbed the dinner dishes back in Malheur, on their winter place. *I'm sending you up to Pendleton when we get to Nyssa, this fall. There's more to life than goats, Rosie-child. You can live with Aunt Jenny and go to school. Until then, you can help Mathilda in Caravan. She's getting on and needs a pair of strong arms. Go get me a clean pan of sand.*

Too *old* to go herding? Shane was fifteen, two years older than she, and Doug was a year older. The three of them had been herding goats together since Shane was eleven. They *needed* her. Mathilda, the Caravan doctor for both humans and goats, was tough as an old doe. *She* didn't need *anyone*. In fact, she had seemed relieved when Rosemarie had told her that Mama wanted her this week. By the time Mama found the note she'd left, it would be too late. She'd be up on the rim with Shane, and Doug, and the goats. They'd have two whole weeks together, before they had to meet up with the Caravan for more supplies.

Go live with Aunt Jenny! Rosemarie capped her waterjug, trying not to think about those awful words. Everything had started to fall apart this winter. Rosemarie shrugged back into her pack, and plodded up the

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narrow crack of the creekbed. Winter was bad enough, because a lot of people left for Pendleton or The Dalles to work winter jobs. It had been worse this year, because Anne McLaren's cousin in The Dalles had gotten Shane a job up there, and Doug had apprenticed to Samuel, the mechanic who kept the Caravan on the road.

Mechanic-work is men's work, Mama had said when Rosemarie had asked her if she could help Samuel, too. Why it took a man to fix an engine, she wouldn't say, but she wouldn't let Rosemarie ask Samuel if she could help, so Rosemarie hadn't seen much of Doug, either.

It was because she had started bleeding. Rosemarie veered south, scrambling up the rocky side of the creekbed. Mama wouldn't say so, but that's when things had started to change. She wrinkled her nose, aware of the rub of her nipples against her shirt. Her breasts were getting bigger. Not big enough to get in the way, like Anne's, but she didn't *want* this. She didn't want *any* of it. It was a pain and a nuisance, and the final straw to a crummy winter. With a last wild scramble, Rosemarie clambered up onto the spine of the ridge. On the far side, the old homestead creekbed cut its way back into Steen's Mountain. Doug and Shane would be in there somewhere, because they *always* started out up the homestead creekbed.

Rosemarie paused to catch her breath. The ridge hid the Caravan and she couldn't spot any of the other Caravan herds. There was only hard blue sky, the wind, and the endless gray sea of sage. It was *spring*. Rosemarie spread her arms, her irritation evaporating suddenly. The chilly wind nosed inside her jacket where the zipper was broken, raising a shiver on her skin that wasn't all cold. The cloudless sky was so *big*. It seemed to pour in through her open jacket, into her chest, filling her up inside with a cold, aching vastness that made her want to dance, or cry, or leap down onto that dusty plain of rocks and sage, run clear to the edge of the world and dive off into space.

You could almost *see* the wind. It wove through sage and rocks and sky, like the warp threads of Mama's winter loom. Rosemarie spread her hands, fingers crooking, as if she could hook her fingers into the fibers of the wind itself, into the warp and woof of the world, shake it, and make it hers. Mama didn't matter, and Nyssa, and Aunt Jenny. She breathed out, in, slowly, feeling the wind in her lungs. Right here, now, above the sage-sea, kissed and tickled by the cold wind, there was only *now* and *forever*. For a moment—just for an instant—she felt *something*. Shimmering threads beneath her fingers. A pattern. If she could only grasp it, she could seize the wind, take the earth and sky into her hands and . . .

The moment passed. Sky was sky, hard and blue and dry. Wind was

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wind. It frisked about her like a dog, pelting her with grit. "Hey, cut it out," Rosemarie yelled, liking the sound of her voice on the clear air.

It puffed cold down her neck and yanked at her ponytail, like Doug or Shane would yank at it. Teasing her. Sometimes, it was her only playmate, the wind. Sometimes, that was fun. Laughing, Rosemarie slithered down into the creekbed in a shower of dust and stones, arms raised against the whip of willow stems as she crashed into the thicket that lined the bottom of the old creek. Goats bleated, and a trio of does bounded out of her way, followed by skittering kids. More goats bleated on the far bank, and she picked out the jingle of Mandy's lead-goat bell.

Bingo.

"Hey, what the hell?" A figure parted the willow-stems; stocky as the goats, sandy-haired, and grinning.

"Hi, Doug." Rosemarie tried to untangle her hair from the willow branches. "You didn't think I was going to let you wander around up here by yourselves, did you? We'd never see those goats again."

"Speaks the girl who gets lost on the main road." Doug snorted. "What are you doing up here? I thought you got stuck doing fetch-and-carry for the Doc?"

"Mama changed her mind," Rosemarie said, and then wondered why she'd said that. She and Shane and Doug had never had any secrets from each other. But she had just lied, and had lied without even thinking about it. She shook her head impatiently. "I'm stuck. Grab this, will you?" She slid out of her pack straps, swung it into Doug's hands.

"What's all this?" Shane shoved his way through the willow brush. He was taller than Doug, dark and slender where Doug was fair and stocky, narrow-hipped and muscled like an antelope, because he ran everywhere. "What're *you* doing here?" he asked.

Annoyance in his tone? Rosemarie's mood faltered.

"She came to look after *us*." Doug raised his thick brows and rolled his eyes.

"She did, huh? *Who* did we have to haul up that cliff last summer?"

"I would have been fine if that ledge hadn't given way." Rosemarie tossed her head. "There was a cave down there."

"With nothing in it." Shane grinned at her. "Some of us have better sense than to risk our necks for nothing."

"You're just weenies." Rosemarie finally got her hair loose from the branches, laughing, relieved inside because after all it was okay, normal, the way it always was when they were together. "Total weenies."

"Weenies, huh?" Doug smiled his slow smile. "Then you can go down into the brush after the lost kids when it starts to get dark. Us weenies'll watch from the bank."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he ran after her to tickle her,

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and it was all right again; the three of them clowning, teasing each other, ganging up two against three in various combinations that never stayed the same very long.

They set up camp in the slanting beams of the setting sun, doing it fast and without much talk, because they'd done it together a thousand times before. As Rosemarie spread the tarp and shook out their sleeping bags, she wondered how they'd worked the routines without her. Which one had laid out the bags, and who had built the fire-ring? Doug was farther up the stream, getting water from the seep that always had something in it, this time of year.

Rosemarie shaded her eyes, looking for him, but the harsh evening light hazed the rocks into a blur of light and shadow. The goats were browsing on sage twigs, still restless this early in the year. They clumped together in family groups, strangers after a long winter in separate barns, eyeing each other warily. Green ear-tags belonged to Doug's parents. Red ones were Mama's, white were the Murphys', and blue-striped ones belonged to Shane's dad. After a few days, they'd start to blend, butting heads until they'd worked out a single pecking order. Tiny kids peered at Rosemarie from the safety of their mothers' legs, or bounced in three directions at once. The three of them always got stuck with the old brood does, because they were easy to herd. Yearlings and bucks tended to scatter. We could handle yearlings, Rosemarie thought, and tossed her head. We're *good*. She flipped a pebble at a wandering kid.

By the time the Caravan reached the sale-yard, up in Nyssa, the kids would be as big as their dams, ready for slaughter. They were lab goats. Scientists had strung their genes together like beads to make them grow fast and meaty, to get along without much food or water. They had been *made*. So they could live out here on the edge of the Dry, where the cattle and sheep had died off long ago. The wind eddied around her, gentler down here, and she put out a hand absently, feeling its cold breath on her palm like a great dog snuffling at her. She hated Nyssa. She hated the dust, and the frightened bleat of the goats as they were prodded onto the big trucks.

This year, she was afraid, too. Afraid of the bus that would take her to Pendleton, and Aunt Jenny, and the city.

Why? Rosemarie shook the last sleeping bag out with an angry snap. Shane had dumped an armload of dry sage-branches beside the fire-ring, and was kneeling beside it, shaving off thin splinters of kindling with his clasp knife. He looked up and smiled as she sat down beside him. He had a black eye, just beginning to fade into green around the edges. She hadn't noticed it before—hadn't seen much of him at all in the confusion of the Caravan forming up and getting underway. Noticing his eye, she

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noticed his face. It had changed over the winter. It looked sharp-edged, and lean. His brown eyes seemed darker, as if they were full of twilight. A sudden shyness took Rosemarie by surprise. She had grown up with Shane. They had fought over toys when they were bare-assed kids, but suddenly . . . he was a stranger.

He saw her looking at his face, grimaced, and lifted one shoulder in a wry shrug. "Dad was pissed that I didn't get back to help with kidding." A thick splinter curled off the stick and flicked into the smooth dirt of the fire-ring.

"I was worried." Rosemarie picked up the shavings and began to pile them into a teepee shape. "I thought we'd have to leave without you."

"I had a ride, but it . . . fell through." He snapped his knife closed, stuck it in his pocket. "I finally hitched with a trucker."

"How was the job? What was The Dalles like? Did you make a lot of money?" She spoke fast, to make the inexplicable shyness go away, and because she was jealous. They had been up here for two days without her, and Doug had heard all this first. "What did you *do?"*

"I helped Patrick haul local produce for the Army." He pushed her hand away and began to rearrange the piled splinters. "He contracts for this lady who supplies the Corps of Engineers in The Dalles. It was okay. I made some money. More than I told Dad about," he said shortly.

"Why?" Outrage sharpened her voice. "He can't take your money."

"Oh yeah?" Shane shrugged; a jerky, angry hunch of his shoulders. "He wants to buy new breeder bucks, and they cost. He says it's reinvestment. We're improving the stock." His voice dripped bitterness. "Like it matters. Like this is something besides a way of using up the desert before it dries up and blows away, like we're doing something more than marking time out here."

"Oh, come off it, Shane." Doug hiked up to the fire-ring and plunked down four dripping jugs. "Is this any worse than loading crates onto a truck?"

"No, but I don't want to spend my life here, pretending that I've got some kind of future."

"So leave," Doug said shortly.

"Will you knock it *off!"* Rosemarie bounced to her feet, furious, wanting to cry, too, and horrified that she might. Shane's talk of leaving shocked her even more than Mama's pronouncement about Aunt Jenny. They had always talked about leaving; going to Portland, or San Francisco, signing on with one of the iceberg trains, hunting for lost treasure in the Dry—but that was just talk. Daydreaming. Underneath was the solid reality of the herding cycle and the Caravan and the cold winter barns. "I didn't sneak out here just to listen to you guys snarl at each other," she said. "What's *with* you, anyway?"

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"Nothing." Doug sighed and righted the water jug she had knocked over. "We're both cranky, I guess. Listen, I found an old road up there. Just beyond the seep."

"Can't be." Shane fished a lighter out of his pocket. "How could we have missed a road, all these years we've brought goats up here?"

"That's the desert for you." Doug's eyes had darkened to the color of twilight. "You can live here all your life, and not find out all its secrets. We've still got a couple of hours until dark."

He was coaxing, trying to soothe Shane's temper. Doug was always the first one to make peace after a fight. "Well, *I'm* coming." Rosemarie fished in her pack for her solar flash, excited in spite of Shane's grumpiness. If Doug said he'd found a road, he had, and it could lead *anywhere*. There was so much out here—the ruins of old farmsteads, or mines, or ranches. People had lived and died in the desert for a long time. Mama said that it hadn't ever been much different, even back before the weather changed and the country started drying up. The desert was a strange place. It swallowed things. Walk ten steps away, and a road or a ruin disappeared—just vanished into the dust and sage.

The wind nudged her, whispering cold excitement in her ear. "Come on, Shane." She dug his flash from his pack, tossed it at him. "Let's *go*."

He caught it with a shrug, and got to his feet. Surly. Rosemarie swallowed irritation. She didn't *want* him to be surly. Not on her last time herding.

Her last time. The tears caught her this time, clogging her throat. No way she was going. No *way*.

"It's up there." Doug pointed upslope, and fell in beside her. "You all right?" He touched her arm.

"Yeah." She shook her head so that her hair whipped into her face, so he couldn't see she'd been crying.

"You really grew a lot this winter." He looked at her, his expression strange. "I didn't notice it until now."

"I grew an inch and a half," Rosemarie said, although she wasn't sure that was what he meant. "There it is. I can't believe we missed it." She pointed.

A road, an honest-to-God dirt track, and they must have grazed the herd right over it at least once. Ten years old or a hundred—you couldn't tell in this dry, forever land—it snaked upward into the mountains, a clearer path of wheel-worn dirt winding across the stony slope.

"Well I'll be." Shane said from behind them.

"Told you so," Doug crowed. "Race you to the end."

They whooped and shouted, and raced up the slope until they were panting and staggering; because it was spring and they'd found something new and possibly wonderful to explore. And because there was

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something *wrong* between them; a sense of strain that had never been there before, and nobody knew quite what to do about it. Everything was *changing*. It made Rosemarie angry and sad, and she ran until she left even Shane behind, and her side ached, and every breath burned her lungs, and she couldn't feel anything else.

The track ended at a ruin. It had been a cabin once, built into the side of the mountain. Rosemarie staggered to a halt, panting, knees wobbly and weak. Stone foundations crumbled beneath it, and gray, weathered boards showed cracks of darkness between them. Rafters showed through the broken roof like weathered bones. Like the track, the cabin could have been ten years old or a hundred. Things didn't age very fast out here.

"Who . . . built it . . . way up here?" Shane came panting up behind her. "Stupid place to build anything."

"Maybe it was a miner." Doug wasn't panting, because he had dropped to a walk, way back. He never could keep up with them running, and he didn't try. "See? I bet that was the tunnel." He jerked his head at a slide-scar of raw dirt and rock on the slope nearby. "Maybe they mined gold."

"Nah. They mined lead or mercury around here. Not gold." Shane pulled at a sagging shutter, leaped back as it crashed to the ground and broke apart. "There was never any gold up here. Let's go back, before we have to chase goats half the night."

Ignoring him, Rosemarie stepped carefully between the warped and fallen boards of the small porch. The empty doorway yawned, full of darkness, although the setting sun poured harsh yellow light onto the face of the cabin. She clicked on her flash, and a brief rodent scuttle made her jump.

"Better be careful." Doug edged up beside her, wary on the brittle boards of the porch. "That roof could come down, or you could go through the floor."

"It's okay." Rosemarie stepped through the door, knowing suddenly and with a certainty in no way rational that it *was* okay.

A table leaned drunkenly on three legs, beside a broken bedstead. A small metal stove stood in one corner, its cooktop covered with the rusted ruins of its stovepipe. Rosemarie pulled a cast-iron skillet from beneath the debris. It was orange with rust, heavy.

"Someone lived here." Doug traced a line in the thick layer of dust that covered the table. "Someone sat at this table and ate rabbit stew out of this skillet." He shivered. "I feel . . . like we're trespassing."

"Some stupid homesteader thought they could make it rain by hoping. *I* don't feel any ghosts." Shane looked in through the doorway, scowling. "Come on. I'm hungry."

"Just a minute." Rosemarie turned around, feeling a pull, *something*,

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in this place. The wind rattled a loose board and sifted dust down from the roof, turning the beam of her flash into a hazy sword of light.

"I do," Doug said. "Let's go, Rose."

Someone was watching them. Rosemarie whirled around, heart slamming her ribs. Every ghost story she had ever heard, or made up around the campfire at night, burst into her brain. Nothing there, just the wind whining through the cracks with the sound of a nervous dog. "Okay, I'm coming," Rosemarie said, but as she started to turn away, her light beam touched something that glinted like metal.

"What is it?" Doug squinted as she reached back into the crack of shadow beneath the window's warped frame.

"I don't know." The little metal box fell open, as if it had been waiting for her to pick it up—or as if the hinges had rusted away. It held folded sheets of paper that shattered to tan bits beneath her fingers. "Letters," she said, regretting that they had crumbled to dust before she could read them. Her fingers touched something else, something hard and smooth as a chicken egg, cold as the wind that breathed over her shoulder.

Doug whistled as she held it up, and the light from her flash caught it. A stone. It was bigger around than her thumb, a soft, translucent gold that glowed like afternoon sunlight as they shone their flashlights on it. Droplets of silver gleamed inside it; like raindrops falling through a pool of golden light.

"It's beautiful," Rosemarie said softly.

"It's amber. Petrified pine sap." Shane leaned over her shoulder. "It might be worth something, in The Dalles or Pendleton."

"No way." Rosemarie carried the golden stone outside. "It's mine." In the light, the stone looked like the honey she'd had for a treat on her last birthday. It felt heavy in her hand, warm, and . . . alive. Magic. "Let's get back." Rosemarie closed her fist on the stone, shoved it deep into her shirt pocket. "Or we *will* be chasing goats all night. They've probably pissed all over our sleeping bags by now, anyway."

That was enough to get them running down the mountainside, laughing again, still under truce. And when they reached the campsite, sure enough, the goats *were* all over the place, because when did goats ever miss a chance to get into *anything* they weren't supposed to be into? At least they hadn't pissed on the sleeping bags. Doug and Shane shooed them out of camp and did a quick head-count while Rosemarie picked up the knocked-over packs, re-stacked Shane's kindling, and lit the fire.

They didn't bother to cook, because it was full dark by the time the fire had burned to a good bed of coals, and they didn't much bother cooking on their first days out, anyway. Dried fruit and smoked goat meat tasted just as good plain, washed down with the luxury of tea, made

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with water from the seep. Which meant they ate straight mush for the last days before they came back down to the Caravan again, but hey, that's the way it was. One of the rhythms that shaped herding season, like the sun's rise and set, water, and the duststorms that sometimes blew up out of the south.

There was comfort in those familiar rhythms. Doug had gotten his battered flute out of his pack and was playing softly—one of his desert tunes, as he called them. The fire flickered as Shane tossed a handful of twigs onto the coals, casting shifting shadows across their faces, striking silver glints from the flute. Goat eyes gleamed dull green in the darkness. The herd always stayed close at night, as if for protection—although the few coyotes around only went after stray kids. Maybe they just liked human company. Sometimes, you woke up with an old doe curled up at the feet of your bag or against your back. Rosemarie stretched, leaning back against Doug's shoulder, her feet (which got cold at night) tucked under Shane's sleeping bag. Doug's flute-music rose and fell, wandering like wind among stones. The music and the firelight closed them into a golden bubble—a small, private universe surrounded by goats and cold darkness.

Rosemarie fished in her pocket. The stone felt smooth as she took it out, warm as her flesh. She set it on one of the stones that ringed the fire—not too near the heat. The silver drops inside the amber gleamed in the glow of the dying fire. "This is a rain stone," she said softly. "Magic trapped the rain inside, and if you say the right words, the rain will come."

Doug's flute had trailed away to silence, and for a moment there was no sound except the hiss of the fire and the sound of the wind on stone. Then a goat bleated, calling to her kid, and Doug laughed softly.

"That would be some find," he said, and the leaping flames filled his eyes with light. "You could make the desert live again."

"Let me see." Shane tossed another branch onto the fire and picked up the stone. "They're bubbles," he said, holding it up to his eye. "You can see. They must have been trapped in the gum, like flies get trapped sometimes."

"They're raindrops." Rosemarie caught the stone as he tossed it to her, nettled by his tone. Last year, he would have agreed that they were raindrops. Last year, it would have been a rain stone, not a lump of dried-out tree sap. She shoved it into her pocket, angry at him, and at the same time . . . sad for him.

"I've got to piss." Doug tossed aside the bag he'd tucked across his legs, and got to his feet. "I'll check on the herd. Yow, that wind has a bite." He shivered, zipped his jacket closed and crunched off into the darkness. After a moment or two, they heard the soft notes of his flute.

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"He's mad at me." Shane crossed his arms on his upraised knees, eyes on the fire, brooding. "But I can't help bugging him. He . . . reminds me of my Dad, sometimes." Shane's voice had gone low and soft. "Up in The Dalles, you can see how things have dried up. You can see where there used to be farms and orchards. It's just dust now. Like here—only up there, you *know* it used to be different. You *know* the land's dying. Out here, you don't have to see it if you don't want to," he said bitterly. "The sage still grows. We can find a little water, way up on the rim. You can tell yourself that everything's fine, that we can go on herding goats forever. You can pretend; like Doug does. And Dad. He pretends he's a cattle baron, like his grandfather. The family used to own that ranch—the big one down the road." Reflected flames danced in his eyes. "Dad told me one winter, when he was drunk."

"I didn't know," Rosemarie said softly. He always wore a cowboy hat, Shane's father. And boots, as if he was going to get up on a horse and ride away, like you saw in the history books. Maybe that's what he dreamed of doing. Maybe that's why he looked at the goats like he hated them, and they had more trouble at kidding than any other herd, and he rode his dirtbike after strays, like he didn't care if he died or not.

She had never thought about it this way. Shane's dad was just Shane's dad—the man with the angry eyes who left bruises on Shane's face that Shane lied about in Caravan, and didn't lie about to her and Doug. She looked at Shane sideways, trying to make sense of the change in him. He seemed older, not just two years-worth of older, but older in some subtle, internal way. The firelight pooled shadow beneath his high cheekbones and highlighted the line of his jaw and throat. He turned his head as if he felt her stare, and Rosemarie felt a flutter in her belly; a sudden prickly strangeness that tightened the skin of her abdomen and thighs, made her want to get up and run, or yell and dance, or do *something*.

"I missed you," he said, and touched her hand.

That touch, light as a feather, traveled along her arm, and down to her belly, where it made the flutter worse.

"I've always been able to talk to you," he said. "No one else talks. About the weather, yeah, and how many kids they got last winter." He jerked his head, eyes angry in the flickering light. "Maybe they're afraid that if they start talking about anything important, they'll have to talk about how they're using up the desert, killing it off with the goats, until everything dries up, and we all blow away."

He was right, about the land. The sage was a little thinner every year. It didn't quite grow back after the goats browsed it down. South and east lay the Dry; the dead heart of the country. It was a land of no water, and rock, and empty towns drifted over in blowing dust. It was getting bigger; coming this way. The grownups talked about it in Caravan, late at night,

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when the kids were all asleep, or out on herd duty. Trapped with Mathilda, she'd listened. They talked about it like it was an animal, stalking them. A monster with gray, dusty hide, and fangs made of bleached bones.

They were afraid, when they talked about it. You could hear it in their voices, like a cold wind. She heard the same fear in Shane's voice, here in the firelight. "What happened in The Dalles?" She closed her fingers around his, felt him shiver. "Something did, didn't it?"

"Patrick was . . . nice to me. He's twenty, and he's lived on his own for awhile." Shane stared into the fire. "He let me stay with him for free. He never loses his temper, Rose. I mean, he gets mad, but he's still thinking. He's an okay guy. I like him a lot." He sighed once, a letting-go that made his shoulders and spine slump. "He . . . asked me to stay," he said very softly. "That's why I missed my ride. We . . . went to bed together, that night. I kind of knew it was going to happen, and . . . I didn't try to make him stop. He would have stopped, if I'd asked." He looked at her at last, an anguished, sideways look that didn't quite connect. "I'm . . . not really sure who I am, Rose. I'm not sure what I am, or where I belong, or if I belong *anywhere*."

"You're Shane," she whispered, because her throat had closed and only a whisper could get out. "And you're here, and it's *okay*." And she lifted her face to him, her body moving on its own, because there weren't any words for this, *none*. He needed something from her, and this seemed . . . right.

They kissed gently at first, and she breathed the scent of his body—not sweat, but musky, warm, *different*, as if she'd never really *smelled* anyone before. The differentness of it shivered down her skin in a strange new way, silver and warm, making her shudder deep down inside. And then it wasn't such a gentle kiss anymore, and she didn't want it to be. The air seemed to thicken around them, as if the very fabric of cold and night was changing, drawing close, like a blanket wrapping them up in their own private space of smell and taste and touch. "I'm going to leave," Shane murmured softly. "When we hit Nyssa. Come with me, Rose? There's nothing for us here. We can catch a ride with a trucker. Please?"

Nyssa again, like a roadsign, or a wall that she couldn't see beyond. She opened her mouth to say something; yes or no, she was waiting to see what would come out. Brush crackled and a stone cracked on stone. They bolted apart like frightened goats, and Rosemarie felt a hot clutch of guilt, as if she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"The goats are fine." Flute on his shoulder, Doug walked over to the fire. "They're settling down fast, this year." He poked at the coals with his toes, not looking at them. "You guys ready to sleep yet? I'm tired."

"Me, too," Rosemarie said. She was blushing, and could feel it.

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It made her angry that she should be blushing, that she should feel like she'd been sneaking. She could kiss Shane if she wanted to. The wind gusted suddenly, whirling sparks into the air, cold on her hot face. Partly, it was what Shane had told her. It sat in her chest, heavy as a stone; a secret that she couldn't share with Doug, a secret that she wasn't sure she really understood. Not completely.

Doug shoved his flute into his pack without speaking. Shedding his jacket, he climbed into his bag. He left his jeans on. They'd always slept in their underwear and shirts. None of them had ever talked about it—they just did it that way. Shane was getting undressed. *He* took off his jeans, and the deliberate way he rolled them up and tucked them down into his bag felt pointed. Rosemarie looked away from the white bulge of his underwear, and she felt herself blushing again. Damn them. Damn The Dalles, and this Patrick, and her bleeding. Damn *everything*. She stood up, unsnapped the waistband of her jeans, unzipped them. Doug had rolled over with his back to her. Shane was staring at the fire. The thick feel to the air was still there, and it made her skin prickle with strangeness. Slowly, she pulled her jeans down, stepped out of them. The wind rubbed against her like a huge, invisible animal, flattening her shirt against the roundness of her breasts, making her nipples get hard from the cold. They weren't looking at her, neither of them. Rosemarie kicked her jeans into her bag, slid into it after them. "Good night," she said.

"Good night." Shane was climbing into his own bag.

"Good night, Rose." Doug rolled suddenly over to face her. In the faint glow from the embers, his eyes looked as dark as Shane's. "Sleep well," he said.

It occurred to Rosemarie that she'd stopped hearing his flute for some time before he'd walked into the firelight. The desert played funny tricks with sound. You could walk right up to someone, and they wouldn't hear you. She wondered suddenly how much Doug had heard, and what he had seen, and why he had stood there, listening in the darkness. Tears came up to clog her throat, hot and choking as a lump of overcooked mush. For a long time, she lay awake, pressed flat by the weight of a million bright stars above her, intensely aware of Doug and Shane on either side; sleeping or awake, she couldn't tell. Her breasts hurt with a thin, fierce ache, and she couldn't sleep. Finally, Rosemarie reached into her pocket and closed her hand around the rain stone. The smooth hardness of it eased some of her restlessness, and after a while, she fell asleep.

They woke late, to gray light and a cold wind that snatched at their clothes and flung grit in their faces. A sneaking, coyote wind, with its

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teeth bared. Rosemarie blinked dust out of her eyes, and zipped her jacket closed as far as she could.

"I guess maybe your rain stone works," Doug said as he tried to get the fire started. "Just don't flood us out, okay?"

"This kind of shit never means rain." Shane scowled up at the high, thin clouds that streamed like ragged banners across the sky. "Not this late."

"It's got to rain *somewhere*. At least it's not a dust storm. I give up." Doug scrambled to his feet, wiping ashes from his hands.

"What do you mean?" Shane glowered. "We got to chase goats without any tea?"

"So *you* start it." Doug turned his back, and stalked off into the sage.

"*I'll* do it." Rosemarie dropped to her knees in the cold dust, scooping sage twigs into a pile.

The coyote-wind seemed to have gotten inside all of them, this morning. She looked at Shane, wanting to say something about last night, about what he had told her. In the cold, harsh light of day, the words wouldn't come. That kind of revelation was for darkness, for the private world of firelight and goat-eyes. He wasn't looking at her, was sitting on his bag, lacing up his boots. Rosemarie sighed and cupped her hands around the tiny flame of the fire, scorching her fingers as she protected it from the coyote-wind.

"Forget the fire." Doug burst out of the sage. "The goats are gone."

"Gone?" Rosemarie stared at him, cupped hands full of fire-heat. "What do you mean, *gone?*"

"They must have scattered. They're all over the mountainside. I only spotted four does."

"God*damn* it." Shane bolted to his feet. "I am so fucking *sick* of goats."

"Maybe someone scared them." Rosemarie cut Doug off, before he could snap back at Shane. "I thought someone was watching us yesterday, up by the old mine."

"Coyotes," Doug's eyes had gone the same flat gray as the windy sky. "They're after the kids, this time of year."

Rosemarie shook her head, sure that it hadn't been a coyote, yesterday. "Let's split up," she said. "You guys take the sides of the creekbed and I'll go straight up the middle. That way, we can run them down into the center, and we won't have to chase them clear up onto Steens."

Shane frowned. "Rose, maybe we shouldn't split up like that. If someone was really spying on us yesterday, maybe you ought to go with me, or with Doug."

"Like *hell!*" That pissed her, that *really* pissed her. First Mama, with her "you're too old to go herding" crap, and now *this*. "When I need you to worry about me, I'll *ask*." She stuffed one of the water-jugs into her

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daypack, slung it over her shoulder, and shoved her way into the willowbrush above their camp.

"Rose . . . marie!"

Doug's voice. He sounded worried, not angry. Shoulder deep in willow, she hesitated, remembering that creepy sense of someone *looking*. This was *their* mountainside, their private space. She glanced back, but Doug and Shane were arguing again. Boys! She watched them turn and stomp off up opposite sides of the creekbed. Goats! She couldn't decide which pissed her more, right now. A willow stem slashed her face like a whip, and her eyes filled with tears as she stomped up the slope. Why couldn't they all just put the damn, miserable winter behind them, be *friends* like they used to be? Why? Why? *Why?* Willow stems whipped at her as she shoved through the thickets, and she couldn't come up with one single answer. Panting, she finally slowed. A doe bleated off to her left; the low, growling murmur of a mother calling her kid out of hiding. A bell chimed faintly. Mandy's bell. It was from Switzerland; an antique. You could always tell its sound from the cheap ones.

Most of the herd would be with Mandy. She was lead doe. Relieved, because at the back of her mind, she had been imagining ravening wolves, or monsters, or worse, Rosemarie pushed through the brush and climbed the north bank. She was almost up to the mine—had come much farther than she'd guessed. A gray head poked up from behind a clump of sage, followed by a second, and then two more. Rosemarie scrambled onto a rock to do a head-count, because the short, squat little goats weren't any taller than the sage.

Most of them were here. The others wouldn't be far away. Nothing had *chased* them. They had just wandered, because goats liked to do unexpected things every so often, just to keep you on your toes. The wind curled around her, its coyote-teeth hidden once more behind soft springtime lips. The cloud-streamers were merging overhead, softening the light, making the dusty green of the sage-leaves and the gray coats of the goats stand out sharp and vividly clear. She could *feel* it up in those clouds: Rain. She could feel the warp and woof of wind and sky, like yesterday, like she could reach out and grab it. Rosemarie groped in her pocket, closed her hand around the warm smoothness of the rain stone. It felt *alive*. Full of power. Hold it up, say the right words, and those gray miserly clouds would wring themselves dry, watering the sage and the goats, driving back the Dry for another season, or two, or three.

If you knew the right words.

"Hey, missy. I want to talk to you."

The strange rough voice startled her. Rosemarie spun around, foot catching on the uneven surface of the boulder. She lost her balance,

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leaped sideways off the rock, and landed wrong and hard on her ankle. Pain spiked up her leg, so sharp that she went down on her knees.

"Don't spook on me now, missy. You hurt yourself?" A man bent over her, holding out a grimy hand, grinning through a tangle of graying beard. "I ain't gonna bite you."

Hex. Rosemarie let her breath out in a whooshing sigh, because she *knew* Hex. He hung around the Caravan, so he could buy water while he scavenged old ranch houses, townsites, and forgotten dumps. "You *scared* me." Rosemarie scrambled to her feet and bit back a cry. Her ankle didn't want to hold her up at all. "You scared our goats. What are you doing up here?"

"Don't blame me for your goats wanderin'." He wiped his nose on the ragged sleeve of his jacket. "You kids were snoopin' around that old cabin upslope. I was right out in the sage, and I heard you, yesterday. That's *my* site. I got a state license for salvage in this county, and you was trespassing. You got somethin' of mine, missy." He stuck out his hand. "Hand it over now."

So the watcher had been Hex. Rosemarie shrugged, sulky and hurting. He didn't belong here. He was the miserable winter, and Shane's dad, and The Dalles. This was *their* space, and he was ruining everything. "A state license doesn't mean you own the whole county." Rosemarie stuck her chin out. "I didn't take anything from you."

"You found something in that cabin. A piece of jewelry or something." Hex's eyes glittered. "I may not own the whole county, miss, but I own what's in that there cabin, and the law says so."

The rain stone. *Her* rain stone, that had brought the clouds. She stared at his grimy, outstretched palm. "I don't have any jewelry. I've got to chase goats." She started to turn away, gasped as he grabbed her arm.

He pulled her around to face him. "Don't you give me lip, missy. I know you. You're Margie's girl. You sure turned into a pretty little filly this winter, didn't you?" He pulled her a step closer, grin widening. "Tell you what. We'll cut a trade. You give me a kiss, and you can have whatever you stole. How's that? Fair?"

"No. Let *go!*" Rosemarie tried to wrench free, but his grip was like iron. She kicked him, but her bad ankle buckled and it wasn't much of a kick. He winced, but he didn't let go. Instead, he yanked her closer. His arms went around her, squashing her against his chest, holding her so tightly that her ribs threatened to crack and she couldn't kick him, or get her leg up to knee him, or even *breathe*.

"You got some some spirit, don't you?" he said and laughed.

She was strong, and she'd always been so sure of her strength. She could run faster than Shane, even. But Hex towered over her by more than a foot, and he was *big*. Rosemarie struggled, frightened suddenly;

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really *scared* in a way she'd never been scared before. The air had gone thick, like it had gone thick last night in the camp, only this was a different kind of thickness; musky and dank, full of violence and fear. Different, and . . . the same. His breath blasted her face, sour and hot, and she leaned away from him.

"Leave her alone." Shane appeared behind Hex, his face pale and angry. "Let go of her!" He grabbed Hex's arm, yanked at him.

Hex staggered, and Rosemarie tore herself out of his grasp.

"Bastard," Shane snarled, and swung his fist at Hex.

Hex growled in his throat and blocked Shane's wild punch. His thick shoulders bunched and he stepped forward faster than Rosemarie could believe anyone could move. A punch to the stomach doubled Shane over. Hex laughed a single, sour note, and backhanded him across the face. "I heard you spent the winter with the McLaren boy." He looked down at Shane, sprawled in the dust. "I guess your dad's right about you not being worth shit."

Shane came up off the ground in a way that no human could move; like a spear, or an arrow shot from a bow. He hit Hex without a sound, slamming one fist into the big man's gut. The second blow caught the scavenger in the jaw, flung him backward as if he'd been hit by the water truck. Hex fell hard, rolled over, and came up onto one knee.

"You little prick," he said thickly. He surged to his feet, took a single step, and stopped still.

Shane crouched facing him, still silent. The blade of his knife flashed white light as the sun stabbed through a break in the clouds. His eyes blazed, dark as the night sky, crazy in a way Rosemarie had never seen before. It was like he wasn't really looking at Hex, like he was seeing something else; a monster, a demon. Something that wasn't human. Something to kill.

"Hey, c'mon, kid." Hex spread his hands. "This is no big deal. It ain't no blood matter. I was just foolin' around." Fear gleamed in his eyes, and he took a step backward as Shane shifted his weight.

"No!" Rosemarie said. The wind whined, loud in her ears, deafeningly loud as she stretched out her hands. "Shane, stop. Don't do it!"

He didn't hear her, wasn't listening, was lost in a world that she couldn't see into, couldn't touch. He was alone in there, never mind that she could *see* him, right there in front of her, with a smear of blood on his chin and the fading bruises on his face. His dark, crazy eyes shut her out, and there was only Shane, and Hex, and death.

Without a sound, he lunged forward, knife swinging upward in a streak of silver light.

"Shane, *no!*" Rosemarie threw herself at him, but her ankle betrayed her. *"Shane!"*

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A blur of motion from her left became Doug; tackling Shane from behind, grunting as he wrapped his arms around Shane. They staggered forward and fell, still locked together, rolling down the steep slope in a shower of rock and dust. Hex gave her a quick glare, turned and ran. Rosemarie ignored him. Afraid, she slithered down the slope after them, teeth clenched against the stabbing pain in her ankle. Way down at the bottom of the creekbed, they were struggling to their feet.

They both clutched the knife, straining chest to chest, faces masked with dust and sweat, silent. Doug looked desperate, and as scared as she felt. It was as if all the beatings Shane had taken over the years, all the bruises and pain and tears he never cried, had sunk into some dark ugly well inside him. They had erupted, here and now, had rushed up to charge that knife with lightning. With death. Rosemarie sobbed once, *feeling* it. Death. It would happen before she reached them; Doug would die, or Shane, and for no reason. For no damn *reason*. With a cry, she stumbled to a halt. Arms spread, crucified by anguish, her fingers clawed the wind. And felt it *move*. Felt the fibers of earth and air and sky again, and this time, she *grabbed* them. Gray cloud streamed inward, like smoke sucked down a crack. A wind whipped her hair, circling like an angry wolf, too big to be a coyote. She clutched her anger and anguish, wrapped it up with the wind, and *threw* it.

The wind screamed, whirling away from her, twisting into a tower of spinning dust. Wolf-wind, it towered over her, sucking up sage leaves, twigs, and dust; growling. Too big to stop, it zig-zagged down the slope, and with a moan, it slammed into Doug and Shane. They fell apart, blinded by dust, shielding their faces from stinging grit. Gasping, terrified by what she had or hadn't done, Rosemarie stumbled and slid down the slope. The twisting wind was thinning away. She was going too fast . . . out of control . . . Shane saw her, put his arms out to stop her, staggered as she crashed into him. They would have fallen, but Doug wrapped his thick, muscular arms around both of them, so that they all staggered, and scrambled, and stayed on their feet.

Cold drops pelted them as the last of the wolf-wind gusted and died, pounding down in a brief rush, then thinning away as the squall moved on up the creekbed. *Rain*, without any magic words, with nothing more than anger and fear . . . and love. Rosemarie pushed damp hair out of her eyes, felt rain and tears on her face.

"I'm sorry," Shane choked out. His eyes were glazed and full of pain, but not crazy anymore. "I don't know what happened . . . I'm *sorry*, Doug."

"It's all right," Doug said.

"No." Shane met his eyes. "It's *not* all right. It's not all right, Doug, and I don't know if it will ever be, so just don't say it is, okay?"

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Doug wiped his eyes on his sleeve, smearing tears and rain and dust to mud. "Okay," he said softly. "I know. I understand."

Shane made an inarticulate sound, and looked away. Blood was running down his fingers, falling in slow, thick drops to the dusty ground. Rosemarie took his hand, turned it over. The knifeblade had slashed his palm in a long, deep diagonal from the base of his thumb, to the base of his little finger. Without a word, Doug pulled a faded bandana out of his pocket. "Close your hand around it," he said. "So you don't bleed all the way back down to camp."

"Most of the does are up here." Shane looked up, drew a quick, shuddering breath. "I counted all but about ten."

"The rest are just west of here. Down in a little pocket. Or they were." Doug managed a smile. "They've probably snuck off by now. You want to go on down, and take care of your hand? We'll chase 'em."

"I'll live." Shane pushed hair back from his dirty face, not quite meeting their eyes. "We better all do it, or it'll take all afternoon."

"Ha." Rosemarie made a face, because they needed to laugh. "You're the guy who scared half the herd into that canyon, last year, remember?"

"How about when you ran those does out into the lakebed?" Shane halfway smiled.

"Let's go." Doug rolled his eyes. "Argue later, okay?"

Hex had disappeared. The mountainside was theirs again. Leaning on the thick willow-stem that Doug had cut for her, Rosemarie whistled perverse goats out of the sage, so that Doug and Shane could chase them down the creekbed. They were putting it back together again; the trio, the unity. Mending the broken pieces.

Only they couldn't. Not really.

She paused near the top of the ridge, where you could see way out across the desert, clear to the old ruined buildings of the cattle ranch that had once belonged to Shane's family. The wind nudged her, like a dog wanting to play, and she spread her fingers, aware of the *texture* of the world, aware of the way earth and sky were the same, just woven differently, like Mama wove different patterns into her rugs. Or had she dreamed it up there? The wind?

"You did it, didn't you?" Doug had come up behind her, bending the fibers of the world as he walked. He was smiling, but there was a wary hunch to his shoulders. "You *made* that rain happen."

"Yes," she said gravely, because she hadn't been dreaming. "I made it happen." It's not the stone, she wanted to tell him. It's the warp and woof of the world, it's *everything*, and I can touch it, and I haven't a clue what to do with it. Maybe she would tell him, someday.

And maybe not.

He loved her. She looked away from his eyes that were the color of the

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desert sky. She hadn't seen it before, or hadn't known *how* to see it. He wanted her to stay here, because the desert was inside him, part of him. And Shane wanted her to come with him, wanted her to save him, only she couldn't, and he wouldn't understand. Rosemarie sighed, aware of Doug's quiet presence beside her, like the shadow cast by a mountain.

The wind nipped lightly at her cheek as she dug into her pocket. "Here." She picked up Doug's lax hand, closed the rain stone up in his palm. It felt warmer than her flesh, alive in his hand. "This is yours," she said. "It was meant for you."

His eyes were full of questions, and faint shadows of the answers that he already knew, but, "Thanks," was all he said. And maybe it *would* bring rain for him; not because it was magic, but because he *believed* that it could, and he believed in the desert, and maybe that was the only weapon that would really fight the Dry. Maybe he would know the right words to say.

Shane came down the slope to meet them, and he and Doug each put an arm around her, because her ankle was really swollen by now. Together, they made their slow way back down to camp. Tomorrow, she'd go back down to Caravan and take Mama's scolding. She'd learn what Mathilda could teach her. In Nyssa, she'd get on a bus for Pendleton, because she didn't know who and what she was either, and she didn't think the answers were here. Not all of them, anyway. But there *were* answers somewhere, and she would have to find them. Or make them up.

"Look," Shane said softly.

A dim rainbow arched over the desert; the faintest brush of color on the clear air. She wondered if she had done it somehow, or if it had simply happened on its own. It shimmered and faded slowly, marking an end, or a beginning, or maybe, just maybe, there wasn't any real difference between the two.

"Shit," Doug said. "The goats are all over camp."

And they were. Hanging onto each other, yelling and whooping, the three of them scrambled down the slope to chase goats out of camp, and see if they'd pissed on the sleeping bags. ●

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THE CITY BURNED

all through the night and well into the next day
Too hot to enter, too hot to even approach,
we watched it burn, from twelve miles away watched
liquid fire flicker in the swamp pools
as wild geese flew across a luminous orange sky
oblivious of shock-waves of heat

Sidewalks cracked
buckled, twisted, and finally melted
Skyscrapers writhed in incandescence,
dripping tears of liquid glass, liquid iron

The hurricane wind circled
hot, hungry, sharp-toothed and ravenous predator
circling in, faster,
hellbent inward
into the white-hot burning heart
screaming and was consumed

The pillar of blackness twisted upward
penetrating the stratosphere; darkening the sky
pointing an angry finger toward God

Ash like malevolent snow drifting down from hell
coating cars dirty white, with opaque white windows
the grass white
our hair, our skins white flaking and ancient.

tongues flavored with bitter pungent smoke,
the grit coating our teeth
burning in our eyes
we watched our city burn.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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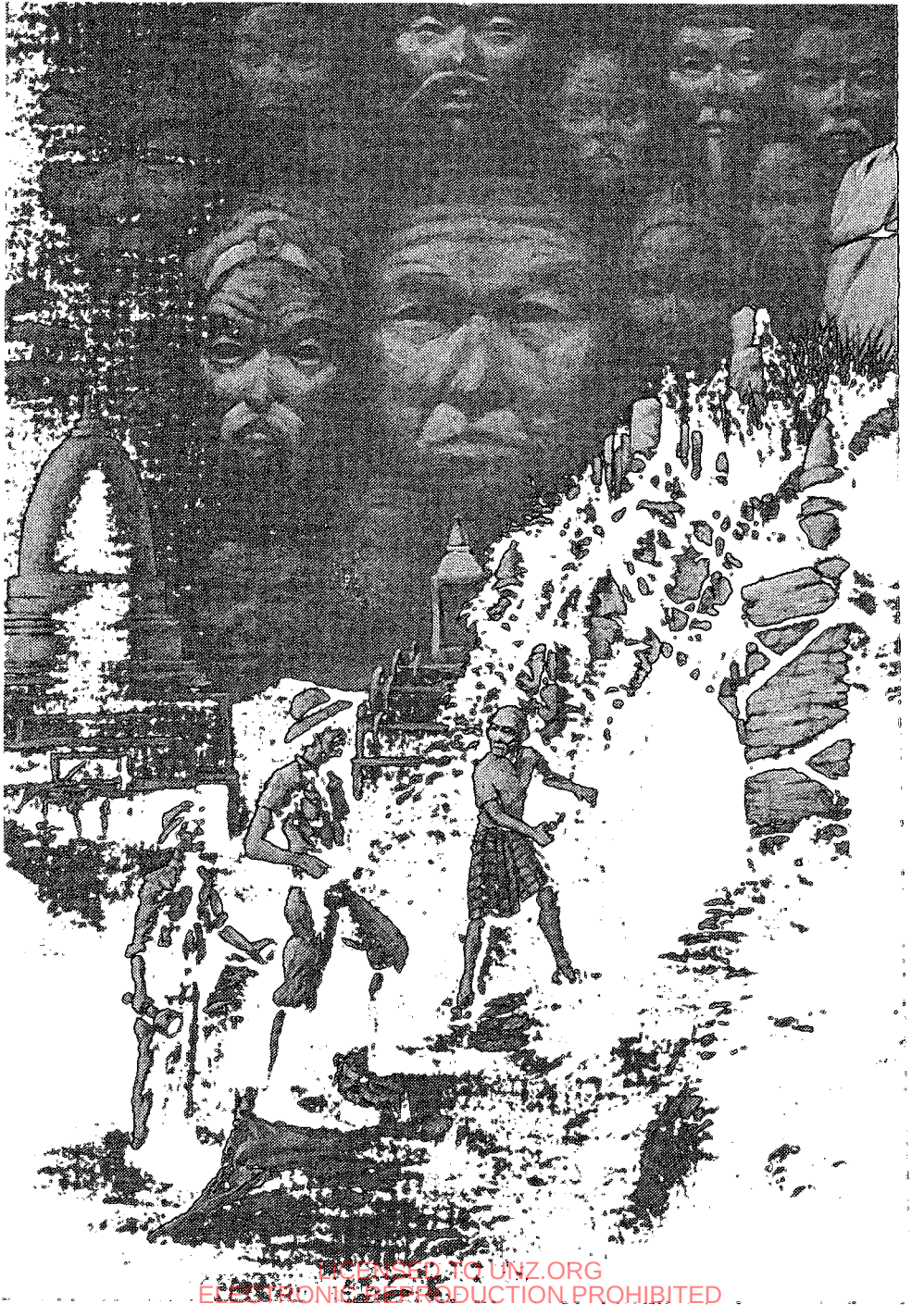

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DEAD GODS

Robert Sampson

The late Robert Sampson had retired from NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in recent years. He published fiction in *Planet Stories, The New Black Mask, A Matter of Crime, Weird Tales, Full Spectrum 1* and *2, Little People,* and other anthologies. In 1986 he received the Edgar Award for best short mystery story, and the last of his eight books, *Dangerous Horizons* (1991), was about series characters of the pulps.

art: Lars Grant-West

The Irrawaddy River has sixty mouths and they gush a thick brown spew that is the flesh stripped from the northern Burmese mountains.

Up that river, Coppard and I traveled with an escort of five government soldiers. That was decades ago, years beyond counting. Our business was government business, and therefore urgent. Or so we had been assured by the Rangoon official who had pronounced himself Coppard's true friend.

The business was simply to ascend the Irrawaddy to Pagan. There we would hunt out a certain Frenchman and secure from him a certain scrap of paper, the merest thing, quite unimportant, although described to us with all possible, if tedious, precision.

For this simple labor, the government—Coppard's friend assured us—would generously extend to us specific commercial privileges in Rangoon. These would no doubt compensate us for the seven-hundred-mile round trip. No doubt at all.

We traveled on a fat little white sternwheeler which methodically plodded along the chocolate-colored river, not stopping often. In Burmese terms, we did not stop often. In Western terms, we dallied interminably.

Our sluggish movement tore at Coppard's nerves. He was a mocking lean man, perhaps near fifty, dry and long and quietly savage. Once he had lectured as a professor of Comparative Anthropology. In his daily life, he retained some of the confidences and certitudes of his former profession.

"Now, Captain," he would say, jocular and malicious, "how may we best squander today? In torpid languor, Captain, drifting through the usual dream?"

Grinning narrowly, he opened and closed his gold cigarette case, producing a series of tart snaps. Although he could speak several Burmese dialects with disdainful ease, his remarks to the captain were invariably in English.

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The captain, an aged little man armored in serenity, smiled vaguely and strolled forward into the intense afternoon light. Later we would tie up at a narrow dock, where the East, with vehement gesture and excited voice, swarmed about the ship in boiling frenzy, accomplishing in hours what should have taken minutes.

"The ship," I pointed out, "follows a routine of planned stops. Our business is quite secondary to its schedule."

Coppard glanced obliquely at me, contemptuous, as usual, of my remarks. "Government business, Mr. Stanton. Which business is temporarily our own."

"Only temporarily," I said. And felt the hot bite of shame at my weak answer. How difficult to sustain civility when animosity constantly ballooned between us.

"Must you invariably excuse the incompetent?" he asked, snapping the gold case. "A quaint concept, Mr. Stanton. Although not one, I surmise, to improve your financial status."

"That is your department, I believe," I told him, and moved away, feeling fear, like a rancid cloud, crowd around my heart. All I owned was in the business we jointly brought to Rangoon. If that failed, I failed. The danger ached in me.

Eventually we reached Pagan, the ancient capital of Burma. Misfortune had reduced it to 3,500 inhabitants and crumbled away the astounding swarm of its temples to perhaps two thousand.

A horse-drawn cart bumped us into the town. There, we immediately learned that the Frenchman had died, an entirely natural death by all accounts. Among his immense and raffish collection of papers, we found no trace of that scrap which would have been of such value to the Burmese government. Or conceivably to the Rangoon official. Nor did such a scrap reappear in anyone's hands, then or later. Who the man was or why it was preferable that he be sought by Westerners or what value resided in his ephemeral paper are unanswerable mysteries.

Our mission had failed miserably. But we did not enjoy the consolation of a hasty retreat from the scene of the disaster. The steamer and its amiable captain had plodded north to Mandalay and would not return for three days.

For three days, Coppard and I and the five soldiers would have to content ourselves with the pleasures of Pagan. These were few and dubious, if you did not care to visit temples. By the afternoon of the first day, boredom lay on us like gray smoke.

Pagan has no hotels. We found refuge at the eight-room government guest house, built by the British in 1922 to accommodate the Prince of Wales. From the veranda, we could look up into a powder-blue sky glowing with heat. For ten weeks, it had not rained. We sat silently. It was

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absurd to reiterate our failure and the consequent collapse of our plans. If you fail, do so without whimpering. And avoid disguising your whimpering beneath endless recapitulation and assessment. So many of our countrymen in the Far East never learn this.

While we sat in this grim state of mind, a tiny brown man crossed the veranda and diffidently approached our table.

"Reverend sirs," he whispered in a fragile voice, "to your attention may I humbly commend myself. To you I bring discussion of interest and importance, were you to hear me."

He was as delicate as a paper toy. He wore the universal costume of sandals, a white shirt, and a half sarong—this of dark brown checks. His face was richly wrinkled, puckered, seamed, and grooved, as if he wore a larger man's skin.

Apology rode behind his eyes. And there was some other emotion—shame, perhaps, or grief. Some strong emotional presence radiating from him as pronounced as a magnetic field.

He introduced himself. He was U Saya Gyi, a religious man, although not a Buddhist. We smiled meager smiles in our boredom and offered him mint tea.

Then, apologetically, stumbling through English sentences as elaborate as wedding cakes, he told us of the Wonderful Place.

Coppard eyed me and I eyed my glass. Both of us knew of The Wonderful Place. Wherever you go in the Far East, you find a man eager to escort you there.

It is a place rich and startling and strange, "quite studded with gems, I assure you, believed to be carved by the genii." The location is known only to him, who discovered it, by the merest chance, only a few nights ago, before the arrival of your lordly royalnesses.

To visit The Wonderful Place costs nothing—a few days' wages for the discoverer to lead you to a scattering of blocks, a low wall shattered by jungle. Or perhaps to an ambush, with gunsmoke sudden among the sage-green trees and men with misshapen knives howling as they cut you down for your shoes and wrist watch.

We were familiar with the story of The Wonderful Place, and the consequences of seeking it.

But U Saya Gyi's place differed from all the rest. It was not above ground, but under. It possessed no gems, no carvings, no whisper of pomp. It was, instead, a holy place, the temple of Haniman, his resting place.

"Haniman," I said. "Sounds German."

Coppard snorted. "You're not four hundred miles from the Andaman Islands," he said. " 'Man' is a common suffix."

To U Saya Gyi, he said, "And who was Haniman?" I saw his mouth

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twist derisively as he asked, for Coppard held strong opinions about the gods of Asia.

"Most worshipful sirs, it is delightful for me to speak of the Lord Haniman, whose name is flowers in the mouth. For he was first of all and lived in the great place, constantly thinking, as you must suppose, most Reverend Sirs. Thinking thoughts as sweet as a young girl's hair."

"Creation myth," I muttered.

The grin grew corrosive along Coppard's lips. "Learn to listen, Mr. Stanton," he muttered.

I listened. But to record U Saya Gyi's fatiguing diction is to make him ridiculous. He was not. Struggling among the traps of our lethal tongue, he attempted to describe the events of a complex mythology. To handicap himself even more completely, he studded his speech with elaborate professions of respect and admiration for us. Nothing I said could change his certainty that Westerners craved such obeisance—no doubt for their own inscrutable reasons.

Eliminating the rhetorical glories, he said this:

Haniman lived at the beginning of the world. There were no men, no women, not one. Being lonely, he took mud from the dark depths of the river and shaped men and women. All these were black. From the bank he took pale clay and made white men. Finally, from the sunlit river bottom mud, he formed first the yellow, then the brown races. All these he placed in the world to go their way.

Now Haniman climbed the mountains to rest and watch. But the mountains were jagged and high. He was so far away he could not see how his people conducted the world. So he said, "I will go now and see."

But while Haniman had rested, the mountain peaks had grown high and sharp and terrible. He could not come down. So he went to see in this way:

In a rose and teak city lived a mighty Sultan whose wife bore him a daughter. As she held up the newborn child, she found it swollen by pregnancy. Then from the womb of that infant emerged Haniman as a tiny babe. This was a singular wonder and noted by many.

For twenty-eight years, Haniman lived among men. As he grew to manhood, he saw that men, by some inner spoilage, possibly because they were made of mud, achieved wickedness more frequently than happiness. Although they were wicked, they were children formed by his hand. And so he decided to die for them, that they might return to serenity.

Rising up, he gathered his followers, and rode an ox and a tiger into the jungle.

Once in the jungle, under the great leaves, the ox gored him. The tiger ate his body, all but the bones. So he was sacrificed. Afterward, his worshippers dug a temple long and deep in the earth and carried his

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bones there. Then they returned to the surface and squatted in the sun, waiting for Haniman to be reborn and come among them again, telling of wonders. But although they waited five years and five years more, he did not appear.

So they went their separate ways across the world. Presently all had forgotten Haniman, who waited patiently in his temple.

"Reverend Sirs, to make an ending to this overlong and unusually interesting adventure I have the delight of relating for your joy, I have most recently found among the five thousand temples of Pagan, so close your honors may rise from your chairs and even now cast your remarkable eyes full against it, the indeed true temple of Haniman, most distinctly and without doubt adorned by ox and tiger on the outward walls."

Coppard lifted his eye to let me see the bitter brightness of it. He asked: "You wish us to accompany you there?"

"If it be your esteemed pleasure to gaze where Haniman waits unsleeping, it would be to me the world's delight to guide your way."

"We have little money," Coppard said. Cold malice edged his face.

"But money," U Saya Gyi said, vaguely confused. "No need for money. To go a few miles, a few miles only, is not for require money, Honorable sir."

"Fine," Coppard said. "No money. And we shall be accompanied by our escort. Five soldiers, government soldiers, with their rifles."

U Saya Gyi's face flared with joy. Bending over the table, he extended his tiny hand to touch the cuff of Coppard's coat, the barest touch, one fragile caress of thanks.

Head bent in the savage light, he whispered, "It will of so much delight be to the Wonderful Haniman."

In early morning, next day, we hired two horse carts and rode east through Pagan—five soldiers, Coppard, and myself, and U Saya Gyi. On either side of the red dirt road stretched neat fields of melons and peanut. Among these lifted the gray stone Buddhist temples of Pagan in all their multitudes. Dozens rose in the fields, and more crowded behind until their numbers faded among distant trees. They were temples, not shrines, being sixty or seventy feet high, and built in three terraces capped by an immense stone bell, itself thirty feet tall.

Every flat surface of these structures fumed with grass, emerald against ancient stone. Fat little trees swelled at their bases. Across the stone wandered thick vines, like the veins on the back of a man's hand.

Not all temples remained derelict. Several stood cleared of vegetation. In the distance, others, freshly white-washed, glared like new ivory plunged into the sedate brown-and-green fields.

It was not to a restored temple that U Saya Gyi led us, but to a low

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mound, crawling with vines. Under the leaves showed tumbled brick and limestone slabs. Whether the mound represented the wreck of a temple or some lesser ruin, I do not know.

Tugging aside a sheet of vines, U Saya Gyi disclosed two time-eroded pillars. Faint symbols had been chiseled into these.

"Tiger and ox," he cried. But who could tell.

Behind the pillars opened a black slit into the mound. From that slit crept a hint of heat, a vague dryness, the dark breath of Haniman's resting place.

Coppard opened the bag containing the flashlights. To the sergeant of the troops, he said, "Wait and watch. We'll return in an hour."

"There are cobras in these ruins," said the sergeant, grimly rigid.

"No, Respected Leader," U Saya Gyi whispered. "This is a holy place quite absent in cobras."

"Let us see," Coppard said and pushed aside the vines.

The entrance plunged from the light, deeply padded by years of decayed leaves. Among the debris lay hundreds of small bones, brown and white, quite dry.

The path lost its overburden of leaf trash and became limestone slabs descending a shallow incline. The harsh air cooled. Echoes followed us twenty feet down to a wide passage smelling of dusty stone. From the ceiling, six feet above us, dangled a beard of white and yellow roots, groping blindly toward our heads.

My light glided along the gray slab walls, exquisitely fit together. A shallow chamber opened left, brimming with darkness.

"Watch your feet," Coppard said brusquely. From beneath his coat slipped a thick-bodied pistol.

U Saya Gyi turned his head. His eyes, watching the pistol, took on the sheen of polished stone.

"In case of snakes," Coppard said, grinning faintly.

"Esteemed sir, this be a holy place most wonderful. Is no cobra here, sir."

"We shall see," Coppard said.

We paced forward, marking the forks by dragging a boot across the packed dust. The air smelled long dead, cool and sour, thick as if breathed for so many ages that it had lost all virtue.

At intervals on either side of the corridor opened chambers of varying size. Into each, I jabbed my light. Shadows bounded along the walls. Each chamber contained only shadows, as if the structure had been abandoned on completion.

Further down the corridor appeared the first traces of human use. Near one entrance, fragments of a stone bench lay broken, as if thrown from a height. In another chamber, foul-smelling mounds, for all the world

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like water-blackened burlap sacks, heaped against the far wall, fetid in the darkness. The floor, itself, gleamed greasily under the flashlights. Low on the far wall, black algae coated the limestone, marking the slow penetration of water. It was the only moisture we had seen in the ruin.

"At last," U Saya Gyi said, "we come to the glorious presence of Haniman, The Wonderful Maker."

A final chamber angled off at the end of the passage. By the entrance brown-and-white fungus bulged from the stone. Coppard's eyes flickered around, examining the wall and ceiling, studying the expression on U Saya Gyi's face, which darkly reflected trouble and concern.

Darkness crawled against my back. The flashlight's bright bar showed nothing—a dusty passage marred by our footprints. I whipped the beam back and forth. Shadows flowed and reared. I felt their movement in my veins, a high, unsteady darting, as if my blood shouted alarm.

"Go ahead," Coppard said to the brown man.

U Saya Gyi bent his head submissively. With precise steps, he entered the chamber of Haniman. Deep ridges netted his downcast face.

I saw Coppard step carefully forward, shoulders bent, narrow face intent. Then his flashlight beam jerked once, precisely as if some solid force had thrust it up. U Saya Gyi darted to the side, whimpering softly.

I stared past Coppard's shoulder, feeling the driving of my heart. I am not certain what I expected to see. Thieves, perhaps, gripping knives. The sudden rustle of snakes twisting toward us across the hard-packed floor.

We were spared such melodrama.

Close to the carved wall of the chamber stood a stone table. Against the table hulked blackness, a mass larger than a man but of no clear shape, thick and wide, without definition, as if a shadow had been crumpled and flung there.

From the doorway to the crouched blackness extended a slender line of footprints.

Across Coppard's rigid shoulder, I saw that the dark mass pressed against the table as if collapsed from an attitude of prayer. It appeared to have no head. Above that part where shoulders might be spilled a pale nimbus of light. I recall thinking that it had exchanged its head for light. That somewhere in the darkness, the head balanced on its severed neck, peering white-eyed toward us.

U Saya Gyi thumped to his knees on the dusty floor. "It is Haniman, now to us truly his presentation."

Coppard pulled a harsh sound from his throat. Striding past U Saya Gyi, he approached the figure, slashed savagely at it with the barrel of his revolver.

The shape crunched dully. For a hideous second, I thought that it had

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lifted a hollow mouth and bitten at the gun. Then I heard material tear. In the blaze of the flashlights, the mass came to pieces. It flew apart with a grinding rattle. Dust puffed up. Bits of pale light scattered across the floor.

Coppard bent to examine the ruin. "Sticks and cloth and phosphorescent paint," he said.

U Saya Gyi remained kneeling, his face pressed against the edge of his tented hands.

Coppard kicked the heap of cloth and began to laugh. "The Wonderful Haniman."

I squatted beside the little man and placed my hand on the narrow bone of his shoulder. "What is this?" I asked.

"Respected Sir, I most heartily wished that you would believe with me of those most splendid things of Haniman."

"Why?"

"Believe me, Sir, I am of all the many past, the last and final of all the rejoiceful priests of serving Haniman, in whose wonders virtue grows."

"The last one?" I asked.

"Who will believe," he asked, "when I die? But if the glorious white lords of so noble fineness believed, so truly others would come to eager themselves for worship."

Coppard came to stand over us, his flashlight beam impaling the floor. "Beltu and As," he said. "Belus, Nin, Dagon, Hadad, and Baal. Nebo, Ptah, and Ogma—all gods, all dead, all forgotten. Men cringed and slobbered before them, and burnt other men, and spilled blood enough to drown the world. Terrible gods. Every one of them all-powerful. Not one of them remembered today. Dead gods. Including Haniman."

"He lives in beautiful serenity, respected sir."

Coppard, much amused, swung the beam of his light around. "Beautiful serenity. Under a ruin in the dirt."

He began to laugh.

I lifted U Saya Gyi. He weighed no more than a scrap of paper. His eyes were closed.

Coppard said, "This is just about worth missing the Frenchman for."

He tramped from the chamber and swung off down the corridor, chuckling to himself. I followed, my arm around U Saya Gyi, who lurched and swayed as if the passage reeled under his feet.

We had progressed perhaps half the distance back toward the entrance, when the voice began. I heard it first as a clear, sweet thread of sound, barely audible. It whispered: "Saya Gyi."

The tiny body under my arm jarred as if clubbed.

The voice called again, stronger, a lovely, melancholy sound rising

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from no certain point, falling upon us from all sides. The words flowed too fast for my imperfect ability to understand.

Coppard stopped suddenly and twisted around to stare back toward us. In the glare of his flashlight, I saw U Saya Gyi's eyes gone huge and staring.

He pulled free of my arm and tottered past Coppard. His face vacantly regarded the dark. He moved on legs rigid as dried sticks. His sandals scraped along the dirt floor.

"What's this?" Coppard cried.

U Saya Gyi hesitated, swayed left, lurched forward into a chamber. We followed, saw his footprints sharp across smooth mud. He stood loose-limbed in the wet chamber. Then he dropped forward to a huddle, supporting himself on knees and elbows, hiding his face.

Again the sweet voice whispered. It was in a language too old, too archaic, too quick for me to understand. It was remote as music across the water, lifting and falling, a glittering thread of sound.

I had no trouble making out what U Saya Gyi said. He spoke so clearly that even I could understand his words.

He said, "Most Wonderful Haniman, my heart is dirt."

Again the sweet thin sound.

"I have lost the habit of belief, Lord," U Saya Gyi whispered.

The smell of damp rot fouled the air. Against the far wall reeked the dark heaps of sacking. To these U Saya Gyi extended his hands.

The sweet voice uttered a rising melodic line that became staccato and faded in a diminishing sigh.

"Perhaps that is true, Reverend Sir," U Saya Gyi said to the wall. "Perhaps I should most certainly die."

His hands relaxed into the mud. When we reached him, he lay in that sprawling looseness from which there is no return.

Coppard snarled and shook his narrow shoulders. His head lifted, forehead grooved by suspicion. He strode across the muddy floor toward the sacking. There he probed angrily with the barrel of his revolver. After a moment, he straightened, standing high above the slanted beam of his flashlight.

I came unwillingly to stand beside him. In the light lay a dark brown fragment of skull. It included part of the upper left jaw, eye socket, and frontal bone.

"Nothing else here," said Coppard. "Turn off your light."

In the darkness, where the skull fragment lay, appeared a dim greenish glowing, not large, hardly the size of a crushed firefly. Coppard snapped on his flashlight and bent over the fragment.

"Fungus," he said, pointing below the eye socket. "Luminous fungus. At least not phosphorescent paint."

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I said, "He came straight here, didn't he? Straight to this chamber?"

"When the voice began. Yes." He looked at me unsmiling but with a grinning superiority behind his face.

"He must have known the fragment was here," I said. "He knelt toward it. He spoke toward it."

Coppard said sardonically, "You think it's a relic of Haniman?"

"Possible," I said. "Maybe. It just might be."

Coppard bent to pick up the piece of skull and it crumbled in his hand to a kind of moist sand, giving off a disagreeable odor.

"Another dead god," he said.

"And the voice?" I asked.

He said sharply, "Didn't you watch U Saya Gyi? Or were you goggling around looking for spooks? When the voice spoke, you could see his throat move. An obvious ventriloquial effect."

After a long while, I said, "I can't believe he knew he was doing it."

"Perhaps not," Coppard said, frigidly superior. "Personality disassociation, would be my guess. It isn't the kind of thing you know. It killed him quick enough."

He bent to scrape a teaspoon of the brownish residue into his cigarette case. Snapping the case shut, he thrust it away. "Unique souvenir," he said. "Personal fragment of a god."

We carried U Saya Gyi's body into the sun and transported him to the guest house at Pagan. Time passed and we returned to Rangoon. The government official, Coppard's special friend, no longer occupied a desk at the Bureau. We could not locate him, nor did any official seem to know where he had gone. They were extremely polite and assisted us gladly. But the man might never have existed. I doubt that even the Frenchman's paper could have called him back.

We conducted our business with another official. The arrangements were reasonably satisfactory, not lavish but more so than we had anticipated.

About six weeks later, Coppard called me to his room in the hotel. I came reluctantly. By then I could not talk comfortably with him. It seemed to me that he swelled with poison—poison of the mind, poison of the heart. A mist of poison hung around him. To be near him brought sickness into my throat, as if he radiated death, a human adder.

I stopped just inside the door.

He extended the gold cigarette case to me. "Remember this, the crumbled piece of skull?"

"Yes."

"Remember how it felt when we touched it? Like moist sand. Very much like moist sand. Remember?"

"I didn't touch it."

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"But you remember how it looked, Mr. Stanton. Surely you can gird up your colossal powers and remember how it looked."

"Yes," I said, edging back from him.

"But look now."

He gestured impatiently. I came reluctantly, taking shallow breaths, keeping my eyes lowered so he would not see how I looked at him.

In the case lay a coarse brown substance of sandy texture.

"Feel it," he directed.

"I would rather not."

"Good God, man," he flared. "Try not to be a complete fool. Feel it."

I gingerly poked my finger tip into what felt to be dry sand.

He said, "You can feel that, can't you?" His voice became intense. "It has begun reassembling itself. Clumping together. Becoming bone again."

I looked at the grainy powder, which contained nothing solid, and carefully wiped my finger clean.

"I can't tell," I said.

"I cannot account for it," he said. "It is most remarkable. It is gradually returning to bone."

I left him and stood in the hotel lobby, watching the busy flow. Of those passing, most were Buddhist, some Christian. Not one of that bright crowd knew of Haniman. For Haniman's last priest was dead and Haniman's bones lay dispersed and silent.

Only two men remembered Haniman. But that, as it happened, was enough. So long as human mind remembers him, Haniman lives. Even sustained by the minds of unbelievers, his godhead dwindled and shrunk, he is not altogether powerless. Not altogether.

For years, I was not conscious of his power. Had I been aware, I still would not have resisted. You grow tired, at last, of your own limitations, sensing those faults of character and intelligence you are unable to change.

One day Haniman glowed in my mind.

"Yes," I said to him. "Yes. Please."

Slowly, weakly, calmly, thought by thought, he brought change. I welcomed it. He drew me quietly. Why should I resist?

Coppard resisted. It was bitter for him, long and harsh and bitter. I visit him twice a year, but he does not look up or open his eyes. He lies quite still, gripping the gold case.

But what was I, in my wretched imperfections, to resist. How can mud resist the sculptor's fingers?

How admirable he is, the Wonderful Haniman, passionless and kind, alive inside me, where the soul glows. ●

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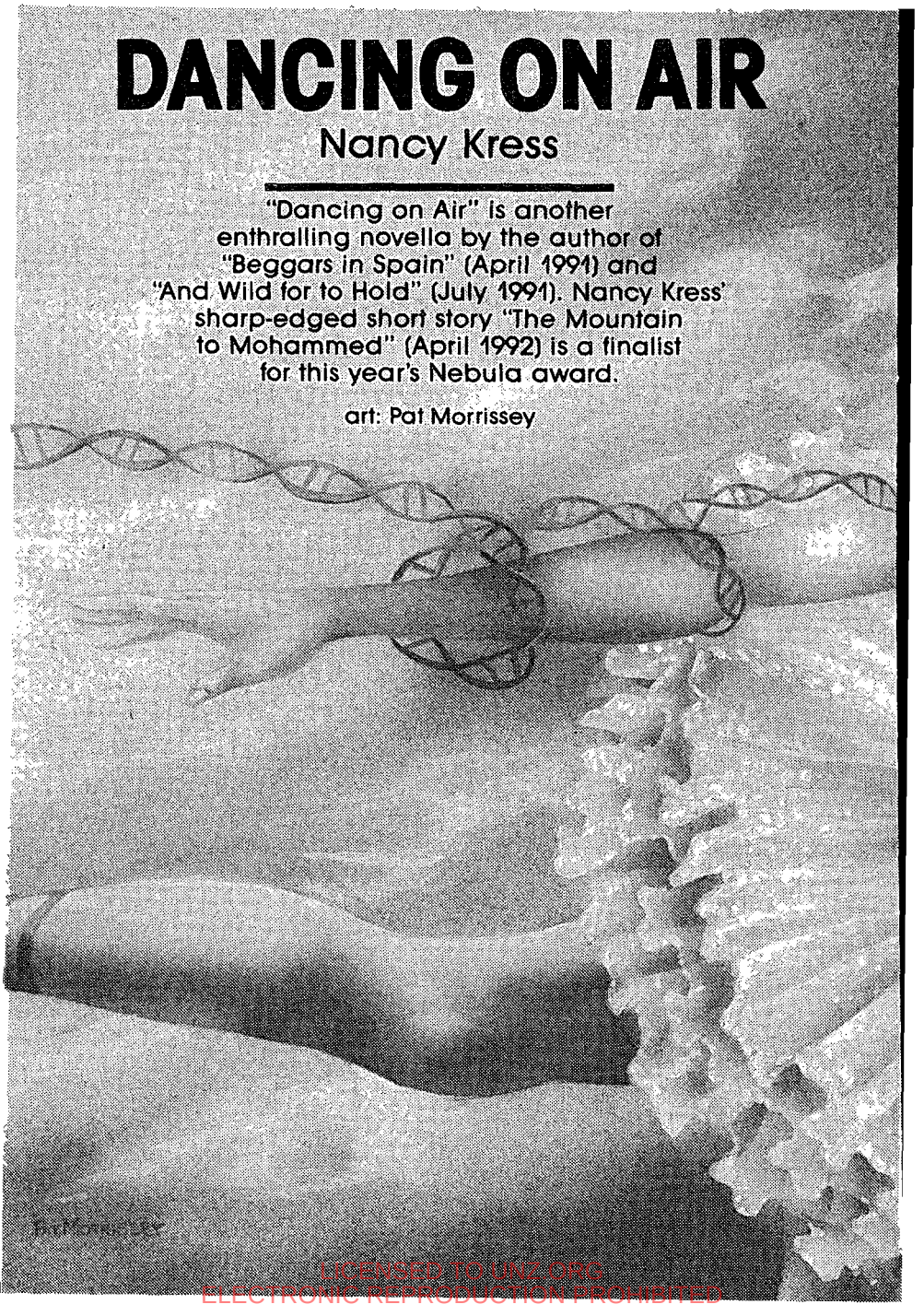
DANCING ON AIR

Nancy Kress

"Dancing on Air" is another enthralling novella by the author of "Beggars in Spain" (April 1991) and "And Wild for to Hold" (July 1991). Nancy Kress' sharp-edged short story "The Mountain to Mohammed" (April 1992) is a finalist for this year's Nebula award.

art: Pat Morrissey



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"When a man has been guilty of a mistake, either in ordering his own affairs, or in directing those of State, or in commanding an army, do we not always say, So-and-so has made a false step in this affair? And can making a false step derive from anything but lack of skill in dancing?"

—Molière

Sometimes I understand the words. Sometimes I do not understand the words.

Eric brings me to the exercise yard. A man and a woman stand there. The man is tall. The woman is short. She has long black fur on her head. She smells angry.

Eric says, "This is Angel. Angel, this is John Cole and Caroline Olson."

"Hello," I say.

"I'm supposed to understand that growl?" the woman says. "Might as well be Russian!"

"Caroline," the man says, "you promised. . . ."

"I know what I promised." She walks away. She smells very angry. I don't understand. My word was *hello*. *Hello* is one of the easy words.

The man says, "Hello, Angel." He smiles. I sniff his shoes and bark. He smells friendly. I smell two cats and a hot dog and street tar and a car. I feel happy. I like cars.

The woman comes back. "If we have to do this, then let's just do it, for Chrissake. Let's sign the papers and get out of this hole."

John Cole says, "The lawyers are all waiting in Eric's office."

Eric's office smells of many people. I go to my place beside the door. I lie down. Maybe later somebody takes me in the car.

A woman looks at many papers and talks. "A contract between Biomod Canine Protection Agency, herein referred to as the party of the first part, and the New York City Ballet, herein referred to as the party of the second part, in fulfillment of the requirements of Columbia Insurance Company, herein referred to as the party of the third part, as those requirements are set forth in Policy 438-69, Section 17, respecting prima ballerina Caroline Olson. The party of the first part shall furnish genetically modified canine protection to Caroline Olson under, and not limited to, the following conditions . . . "

The words are hard.

I think words I can understand.

My name is Angel. I am a dog. I protect. Eric tells me to protect. No people can touch the one I protect except safe people. I love people I protect. I sleep now.

"Angel," Eric says from his chair, "wake up now. You must protect."

I wake up. Eric walks to me. He sits next to me. He puts his voice in my ear.

"This is Caroline. You must protect Caroline. No one must hurt Caroline. No one must touch Caroline except safe people. Angel—*protect Caroline.*"

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I smell Caroline. I am very happy. I protect Caroline.
"Jesus H. Christ," Caroline says. She walks away.
I love Caroline.

We go in the car. We go very far. Many people. Many smells. John drives the car. John is safe. He may touch Caroline. John stops the car. We get out. There are many tall buildings and many cars.
"You sure you're going to be okay?" John Cole says.
"You've protected your investment, haven't you?" Caroline snarls. John drives away.
A man stands by the door. The man says, "Evening, Miss Olson."
"Evening, Sam. This is my new guard dog. The company insists I have one, after . . . what's been happening. They say the insurance company is paranoid. Yeah, sure. I need a dog like I need a knee injury."
"Yes, ma'am. Doberman, isn't he? He looks like a goooood ol' dog. Hey, big fella, what's your name?"
"Angel," I say.
The man jumps and makes a noise. Caroline laughs.
"Bioenhanced. Great for my privacy, right? Rover, Sam is safe. Do you hear me? Sam is *safe*."
I say, "My name is Angel."
Caroline says, "Sam, you can relax. Really. He only attacks on command, or if I scream, or if he hasn't been told a person is safe and that person touches me."
"Yes, ma'am." Sam smells afraid. He looks at me hard. I bark and my tail moves.
Caroline says, "Come on, Fido. Your spy career is about to begin."
I say, "My name is Angel."
"Right," Caroline says.
We go into the building. We go in the elevator. I say, "Sam has a cat. I smell Sam's cat."
"Who the fuck cares," Caroline says.
I am a dog.
I must love Caroline.

2.

Two days after the second ballerina was murdered, Michael Chow, senior editor of *New York Now* and my boss, called me into his office. I already knew what he wanted, and I already knew I didn't want to do it. He knew that, too. We both knew it wouldn't make any difference.
"You're the logical reporter, Susan," Michael said. He sat behind the desk, always a bad sign. When he thought I'd want an assignment, he leaned casually against the front of the desk. Its top was cluttered with print-outs; with disposable research cartridges, some with their screens alight; with pictures of Michael's six children. *Six*. They all looked like

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Michael: straight black hair and a smooth face like a peeled egg. At the apex of the mess sat a hardcopy of the *Times* 3:00 P.M. on-line lead: AUTOPSY DISCOVERS BIOENHANCERS IN CITY BALLET DANCER. "You have an in. Even Anton Privitera will talk to you."

"Not about this. He already gave his press conference. Such as it was."

"So? You can get to him as a parent and leverage from there."

My daughter Deborah was a student in the School of American Ballet, the juvenile province of Anton Privitera's kingdom. For thirty years he had ruled the New York City Ballet like an anointed tyrant. Sometimes it seemed he could even levy taxes and raise armies, so exalted was his reputation in the dance world, and so good was his business manager John Cole at raising funds and enlisting corporate patrons. Dancers had flocked to the City Ballet from Europe, from Asia, from South America, from the serious ballet schools in the patrolled zones of America's dying cities. Until bioenhancers, the New York City Ballet had been the undisputed grail of the international dance world.

Now, of course, that was changing.

Privitera was dynamic with the press as long as we were content with what he wished us to know. He wasn't going to want to discuss the murder of two dancers, one of them his own.

A month ago Nicole Heyer, a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater, had been found strangled in Central Park. Three days ago the body of Jennifer Lang had been found in her modest apartment. Heyer had been a bioenhanced dancer who had come to the ABT from the Stuttgart Ballet. Lang, a minor soloist with the City Ballet, had of course been natural. Or so everybody thought until the autopsy. The entire company had been bioscanned only three weeks ago, Artistic Director Privitera had told the press, but apparently these particular viroenhancers were so new and so different that they hadn't even shown up on the scan.

I wondered how to make Michael understand the depth of my dislike for all this.

"Don't cover the usual police stuff," Michael said, "nor the scientific stuff on bioenhancement. Concentrate on the human angle you do so well. What's the effect of these murders on the other dancers? Has it affected their dancing? Does Privitera seem more confirmed in his company policy now, or has this shaken him enough to consider a change? What's he doing to protect his dancers? How do the parents feel about the youngsters in the ballet school? Are they withdrawing them until the killer is caught?"

I said, "You don't have any sensitivity at all, do you, Michael?"

He said quietly, "Your girl's seventeen, Susan. If you couldn't get her to leave dancing before, you're not going to get her to leave now. Will you do the story?"

I looked again at the scattered pictures of Michael's children. His oldest

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was at Harvard Law. His second son was a happily married househusband, raising three kids. His third child, a daughter, was doing six-to-ten in Rocky Mountain Maximum Security State Prison for armed robbery. There was no figuring it out. I said, "I'll do the story."

"Good," he said, not looking at me. "Just hold down the metaphors, Susan. You're still too given to metaphors."

"*New York Now* could use a few metaphors. A feature magazine isn't supposed to be a TV holo bite."

"A feature magazine isn't art, either," Michael retorted. "Let's all keep that in mind."

"You're in luck," I said. "As it happens, I'm not a great lover of art."

I couldn't decide whether to tell Deborah I had agreed to write about ballet. She would hate my writing about her world under threat.

Which was a reason both for and against.

September heat and long, cool shadows fought it out over the wide plaza of Lincoln Center. The fountain splashed, surrounded by tourists and students and strollers and derelicts. I thought Lincoln Center was ugly, shoe-box architecture stuck around a charmless expanse of stone unredeemed by a little splashing water. Michael said I only felt that way because I hated New York. If Lincoln Center had been built in Kentucky, he said, I would have admired it.

I had remembered to get the electronic password from Deborah. Since the first murder, the New York State Theater changed it weekly. Late afternoons was heavy rehearsal time; the company was using the stage as well as the new studios. I heard the Spanish bolero from the second act of *Coppelia*. Deborah had been trying to learn it for weeks. The role of Swanilda, the girl who pretends to be a doll, had first made the brilliant Caroline Olson a superstar.

Privitera's office was a jumble of dance programs, costume swatches, and computers. He made me wait for him for twenty minutes. I sat and thought about what I knew about bioenhanced dancers, besides the fact that there weren't supposed to have been any at City Ballet.

There were several kinds of bioenhancement. All of them were experimental, all of them were illegal in the United States, all of them were constantly in flux as new discoveries were made and rushed onto the European, South American, and Japanese markets. It was a new science, chaotic and contradictory, like physics at the start of the last century, or cancer cures at the start of this one. No bioenhancements had been developed specifically for ballet dancers, who were an insignificant portion of the population. But European dancers submitted to experimental versions, as did American dancers who could travel to Berlin or Copenhagen or Rio for the very expensive privilege of injecting their bodies with tiny, unproven biological "machines."

Some nanomachines carried programming that searched out deviations in the body and repaired them to match surrounding tissue. This speeded the healing of some injuries some of the time, or only erratically,

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or not at all, depending on whom you believed. Jennifer Lang had been receiving these treatments, trying desperately to lessen the injury rate that went hand-in-hand with ballet. The nanomachines were highly experimental, and nobody was sure what long-term effect they might have, reproducing themselves in the human body, interacting with human DNA.

Bone builders were both simpler and more dangerous. They were altered viruses, reprogrammed to change the shape or density of bones. Most of the experimental work had been done on old women with advanced osteoporosis. Some grew denser bones after treatment. The rest didn't. In ballet, the legs are required to rotate 180 degrees in the hip sockets—the famous "turn out" that had destroyed so many dancers' hips and knees. If bones could be altered to swivel 180 degrees *naturally* in their sockets, turn out would cause far less strain and disintegration. Extension could also be higher, making easier the spectacular *arabesques* and *grand battement* kicks.

If the bones of the foot were reshaped, foot injuries could be lessened in the unnatural act of dancing on toe.

Bioenhanced leg muscles could be stronger, for higher jumps, greater speed, more stamina.

Anything that helped metabolic efficiency or lung capacity could help a dancer sustain movements. They could also help her keep down her weight without anorexia, the secret vice of the ballet world.

Dancers in Europe began to experiment with bioenhancement. First cautiously, clandestinely. Then scandalously. Now openly, as a mark of pride. A dancer with the Royal Ballet or the Bolshoi or the Nederlands Dans Theater who didn't have his or her body enhanced was considered undevoted to movement. A dancer at the New York City Ballet who did have his or her body enhanced was considered undevoted to art.

Privitera swept into his office without apology for being late. "Ah, there you are. What can I do for you?" His accent was very light, but still the musical tones of his native Tuscany were there. It gave his words a deceptive intimacy.

"I've come about my daughter, Deborah Anders. She's in the D level at SAB. She's the one who—"

"Yes, yes, yes, I know who she is. I know all my dancers, even the very young ones. Of course. But shouldn't you be talking with Madame Alois? She is the director of our School."

"But you make all the important decisions," I said, trying to smile winningly.

Privitera sat on a wing chair. He must have been in his seventies, yet he moved like a young man: straight strong back, light movements. The famous bright blue eyes met mine shrewdly. His vitality and physical presence on stage had made him a legendary dancer; now he was simply a legend. Whatever he decided the New York City Ballet should be, it became. I didn't like him. The absolute power bothered me—even though

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it was merely power over an art form seen by only a fraction of the people who watched soccer or football.

"I have three questions about Deborah, Mr. Privitera. First—and I'm sure you hear this all the time—can you give me some idea of her chances as a professional dancer? She'll have to apply to college this fall, if she's going to go, and although what she really wants is to dance professionally, if that's not going to happen then we need to think about other—"

"Yes, yes," Privitera said, swatting away this question like the irrelevancy he considered it to be. "But dance is never a second choice, Ms. Anders."

"Matthews," I said. "Susan Matthews. Anders is Deborah's name."

"If Deborah has it in her to be a dancer, that's what she will be. If not—" He shrugged. People who were not dancers ceased to exist for Anton Privitera.

"That's what I want to know. Does she have it in her to be a professional dancer? Her teachers say she has good musicality and rhythm, but . . . "

My hands gripped together so tightly the skin was gray.

"Perhaps. Perhaps. You must leave it to me to judge when the time comes."

"But that's what I'm saying, " I said, as agreeably as I could. "The time *has* come. College—"

"You cannot hurry art. If Deborah is meant to be a dancer, she will become one. Leave it to me, dear."

Dear. It was what he called all his dancers. I saw that it had just slipped out. *Leave it to me, dear. I know best.* How often did he say that in class, in rehearsal, during a choreography session, before a performance?

The muted strains of *Coppelia* drifted through the walls. I said, "Then let me ask my second question. As a parent, I'm naturally concerned about Deborah's safety since these awful murders. What steps has City Ballet taken to ensure the safety of the students and dancers?"

The intense eyes contracted to blue shards. But I could see the moment he decided the question was within a parent's right to ask. "The police do not think there is danger to the students. This . . . madman, this *bestia,* apparently attacks only full-fledged dancers, soloists and principals who have tried to reach art through medicine and not through dancing. No dancer in my company or my school is bioenhanced. My dancers believe as I do: You can achieve art only through talent and work, through opening yourself to the dance, not through mechanical aids. What they do at the ABT—that is *not art!* Besides," he added, with an abrupt descent to the practical, "students cannot afford bioenhancing operations."

Idealism enforced by realism—I saw the combination that kept the City Ballet a success, despite the technically superior performances of bioenhanced dancers. I could almost hear dancers and patrons alike: *"The only* real *ballet." "Dance that preserves the necessary illusion that the performers' bodies and the audience's are fundamentally the same."*

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"My dear, he's simply the most wonderful man, saving the precious traditions that made dance great in the first place. We've pledged twenty thousand dollars—"

I decided to push. "But Jennifer Lang apparently found a way to afford illegal bioenhancements that—"

"That has nothing to do with your Deborah," Privitera said, standing in one fluid movement. His blue eyes were arctic. "Now if you will excuse me, many things call me."

"But you haven't said what you *are* doing for the students' safety," I said, not rising from my chair, trying to sound as if my only interest were parental. "Please, I need to know. Deborah . . ."

He barely repressed a sigh. "We have increased security, Ms. Anders. Electronic surveillance both at SAB and Lincoln Center has been added to, with specifics that I cannot discuss. We have hired additional escorts for those students performing small professional roles who must leave Lincoln Center after ten at night. We have created new emphasis on teaching our young dancers the importance, the complete *necessity,* of training their bodies for dance, not relying on drugs and operations that can only offer tawdry imitations of the genuine experience of art."

I doubted City Ballet had actually done all that: it had only been three days since Jennifer Lang's murder. But Privitera's rhetoric helped me ask my last questions.

"Have any other parents withdrawn their sons and daughters from SAB? For that matter, have any of your dancers altered their performance schedules? How has the company as a whole been affected?"

Privitera looked at me with utter scorn. "If a dancer—even a student dancer—leaves me because some *bestia* is killing performers who do what I have insisted my dancers *not* do—such a so-called dancer should leave. There is no place for such a dancer in my school or my company. Don't you understand, Ms. Anders—this is the *New York City Ballet.*"

He left. Through the open door the music was clear: still the Spanish dance from *Coppelia.* The girl who turned herself into a beautiful doll.

Michael was right. I was definitely too given to metaphors.

As I walked down the hall, it occurred to me that Privitera hadn't mentioned increased bioscanning. Surely that would make the most sense—discover which dancers were attaining their high jumps and strong *developpés* through bioenhancement, and then eliminate those dancers from the purity of the company? Before some *bestia* did it first.

Deborah, I knew, was taking an extra class in Studio 3. I shouldn't go. If I went, we would only fight again. I pushed open the door to Studio 3.

I sat on a hard small chair with the ballet mothers waiting for the class to end. I knew better than to talk to any of them. They all wanted their daughters to succeed in ballet.

Barre warm-ups were over. The warm air smelled of rosin on wood. Dancers worked in the center of the floor, sweat dripping off their twirling and leaping bodies. *Bourées, pirouettes, entrechats.* "Non, non!" the teacher called, a retired French dancer whom I had never seen smile.

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"When you jump, your arms must help. They must pull you through from left to right. Like this."

Deborah did the step wrong. "Non, non!" the teacher called. "Like this!"

Deborah still did it wrong. She grimaced. I felt my stomach tighten.

Deborah tried again. It was still wrong. The teacher gestured toward the back of the room. Deborah walked to the barre and practiced the step alone while the rest of the class went on leaping. *Plié, relevé,* then . . . I didn't know the names of the rest of these steps. Whatever they were, she was still doing them wrong. Deborah tried over and over again, her face clenched. I couldn't watch.

When Deborah was fourteen, she ran away from home in St. Louis to her father's hovel in New York, the same father she had not seen since she was three. She wanted to dance for Anton Privitera, she said. I demanded that Pers, whom I had divorced for desertion, send her back. He refused. Deborah moved into his rat-trap on West 110th, way outside Manhattan's patrolled zone. The lack of police protection didn't deter her, the filthy toilet down the hall didn't deter her, the nine-year-old who was shot dealing sunshine on the stoop next door didn't deter her. When I flew to New York, she cried but refused to go home. She wanted to dance for Anton Privitera.

You can't physically wrestle a fourteen-year-old onto a plane. You can argue, and scream, and threaten, and plead, and cry, but you cannot physically move her. Not without a court order. I filed for breach of custody.

Pers did the most effective thing you can do in the New York judicial system: nothing. Since Pers was an indigent periodically on public assistance, the court appointed a public defender for him. The public defender had 154 cases. He asked for three continuances in a row. The judge had a docket full six months ahead. In less than a year and a half Deborah would be sixteen, legally entitled to leave home. She auditioned for Privitera, and the School of American Ballet accepted her.

Another kid was shot, this one on the subway just before Pers's stop. She was twelve. A boy was knifed, a young mother was raped, houses were torched. Pers's lawyer resigned. Another was appointed, who immediately filed for a continuance.

I quit my job with *St. Louis On-Line* and moved to New York. I left behind a new promotion, a house I loved, and a man I had just started to care about. I found work on Michael's magazine, for half the prestige and two-thirds the salary, in a city twice as expensive and three times as dangerous. I took a two-room apartment on West Seventy-fifth, shabby but decent, just inside the patrolled zone. From my living room window I could see the shimmer of the electronic fence marking the zone. The shimmer bent to exclude all of Central Park north of Seventieth. I bought a gun.

After a few tense weeks, Deborah moved in with me. We lived with piles of toe shoes and surgical tape, with leotards and tights drying on a

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line strung across the living room, with *Dance* magazine in tattered third-hand copies that would go on to be somebody else's fourth-hand copies, with bunions and inflamed tendons and pulled ligaments. We lived with Deborah's guilt and my anger. At night I lay awake on the pull-out sofa, staring at the ceiling, remembering the day Deborah had started kindergarten and I had opened a college fund for her. She refused now to consider college. She wanted to dance for Anton Privitera.

Privitera had not yet invited her to join the company. She had just turned seventeen. This was her last year with the School. If she weren't invited into the corps de ballet this year, she could forget about dancing for the New York City Ballet.

I sat with the ballet mothers and watched. Deborah's extension was not as high as some of the other girls', her strength not always enough to sustain a slow, difficult move.

So glamorous! the ballet mothers screeched. So beautiful! So wonderful for a girl to know so young what she wants to do with her life! The ballet mothers apparently never saw the constant injuries, the fatigue, the competition that made every friend a deadly rival, the narrowing down of a young world until there is only one definition of success: Do I get to dance for Privitera? Everything else is failure. Life and death, determined at seventeen. "I don't know what I'll do if Jeannie isn't asked to join the company," Jeannie's mother told me. "It would be like we both died. Maybe we would."

"You're so unfair, Mom!" Deborah shouted at me periodically in the tiny, jammed apartment. "You never see the good side of dancing! You're so against me!"

Is it so unfair to hope that your child will be forced out of a life that can only break her body and her heart? A life whose future will belong only to those willing to become human test tubes for inhuman biological experiments?

Nicole Heyer, the dead ABT dancer, had apparently come to the United States from Germany because she could not compete with the dazzlingly bioenhanced dancers in her own country. Jennifer Lang, an ordinary girl from an ordinary Houston family, had lacked the money for major experimentation. To finance her bioenhancements in European labs, she had rented herself out as a glamorous and expensive call girl. Fuck a ballerina! That was how her killer had gotten into her apartment.

In her corner of Studio 3, Deborah finally got the sequence of steps straight, although I could see she was wobbly. She rejoined the class. The room had become as steamy as a Turkish bath. Students ran and leapt the whole length of the hall, corner to corner, in groups of six. "*Grand jeté* in third *arabesque*," Madame called. "Non, non, more extension, Lisa. Victoria, more quick—*vite! vite!* One, two . . . next group."

Deborah ran, jumped, and crashed to the ground.

I stood. Jeannie's mother put a hand on my arm. "You can't go to her," she said matter-of-factly. "You'll interfere with her discipline."

Madame ran gnarled hands over Deborah's ankle. "Lisa, help her to

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the side. Ninette, go tell the office to send the doctor. Alors, next group, *grand jeté* in third *arabesque*. . . ."

I shook off Jeannie's mother's hand and walked slowly to where Deborah sat, her face twisted in pain.

"It's nothing, Mom."

"Don't move it until the doctor gets here."

"I said it's nothing!"

It was a sprain. The doctor taped it and said Deborah shouldn't dance for a week.

At home she limped to her room. An hour later I found her at the barre.

"Deborah! You heard what the doctor said!"

Her eyes were luminous with tears: Odette as the dying swan, Giselle in the mad scene. "I have to, Mom! You don't understand! They're casting *Nutcracker* in two weeks! I have to be there, dancing!"

"Deborah—"

"I can dance through the injury! Leave me alone!"

Deborah had never yet been cast in Privitera's *Nutcracker*. I watched her transfer her weight gingerly to the injured ankle, wince, and *plié*. She wouldn't meet my eyes in the mirror.

Slowly I closed the door.

That night we had tickets to see *Coppelia*. Caroline Olson skimmed across the stage, barely seeming to touch ground. Her *grand jetés* brought gasps from the sophisticated New York ballet audience. In the final act, when Swanilda danced a tender *pas de deux* with her lover Franz, I could see heads motionless all over the theater, lips slightly parted, barely breathing. Franz turned her slowly in a liquid *arabesque*, her leg impossibly high, followed by *pirouettes*. Swanilda melted from one pose to another, her long silken legs forming a perfect line with her body, flesh made light and strong and elegant as the music itself.

Beside me, I felt Deborah's despair.

3.

Caroline jumps. She jumps with her hind legs out straight, one in front and one in back. She runs in circles and jumps again. Dmitri catches her.

"No, no," Mr. Privitera says. "Not like that. *Promenade en couronne, attitude, arabesque effacé*. Now the lift. Dimitri, you are handling her like a sack of grain. Like this."

Mr. Privitera picks up Caroline. My ears raise. But Mr. Privitera is safe. Mr. Privitera can touch Caroline. Dmitri can touch Caroline. Carlos can touch Caroline.

Dmitri says, "It's the damn *dog*. How am I supposed to learn the part with him staring at me, ready to tear me limb from limb? How the hell am I supposed to concentrate?"

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John Cole sits next to me. John says, "Dmitri, there's no chance Angel will attack you. His biochip is state-of-the-art programming. I told you. If you're in his 'safe' directory, you'd have to actually attack Caroline yourself before Angel would act, unless Caroline told him otherwise. There's no real danger to break your concentration."

Dmitri says, "And what if I drop her accidentally? How do I know that won't look like an attack to that dog?"

Caroline sits down. She looks at John. She looks at Dmitri. She does not look at me. She smiles.

John says, "A drop is not an attack. Unless Caroline screams—and we all know she never does, no matter what the injury—there's no danger. Believe me."

"I don't," Dmitri says.

Everybody stands quiet.

Mr. Privitera says, "Caroline, dear, let me drop you. Stand up. Ready—lift."

Caroline smells surprised. She stands. Mr. Privitera picks up Caroline. She jumps a little. He picks her up over his head. She falls down hard. My ears raise. Caroline does not scream. She is not hurt. Mr. Privitera is safe. Caroline said Mr. Privitera is safe.

"See?" Mr. Privitera says. He breathes hard. "No danger. Positions, please. *Promenade en couronne, attitude, arabesque effacé*, lift."

Dmitri picks up Caroline. The music gets loud. John says in my ear, "Angel—did Caroline go away from her house last night?"

"Yes," I say.

"Where did Caroline go?"

"Left four blocks, right one block. Caroline gave money."

"The bakery," John says. "Did she go away to any more places, or did she go home?"

"Caroline goes home last night."

"Did anyone come to Caroline's house last night?"

"No people come to Caroline's house last night."

"Thank you," John says. He pats me. I feel happy.

Caroline looks at us. A woman ties a long cloth on Caroline's waist. The woman gives Caroline a piece of wood. Yesterday I ask John what the wood is. Yesterday John says it is a fan. The music starts, faster. Caroline does not jump. Yesterday Caroline jumps with the fan.

"Caroline?" Mr. Privitera says. "Start here, dear."

Caroline jumps. She still looks at John. He looks at me.

Some woman here smells of yogurt and a bitch collie in heat.

Caroline opens the bedroom door. She comes out. She wears jeans on her hind legs. She wears a hat on her head. It covers all her fur. She walks to the door. She says to me, "Stay, you old fleabag. You hear me? Stay!"

I walk to the door.

"Christ." Caroline opens the door a little way. She pushes her body

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through the door. She closes the door. I push through the door hard with her.

"I said stay!" Caroline opens the door again. She pushes me. I do not go inside. Caroline goes inside. I follow Caroline.

"Take two," Caroline says. She opens the door. She walks away. She goes back. She closes the door. She opens the door. She closes the door. She turns around. She goes through the door and closes it hard. She is very fast. I am inside alone.

"Gotcha, Fido!" Caroline says through the door.

I howl. I throw myself against the door. I bark and howl. The light goes on in my head. I howl and howl.

Soon Caroline comes through the door. A man holds her arm. He smells of iron. He talks to a box.

"Subject elected to return to her apartment, sir, rather than have me accompany her to her destination. We're in here now."

Caroline grabs the box. "John, you shit, how *dare* you! You had the dog bio-wired! That's an invasion of privacy, I'll sue your ass off, I'll quit the company, I'll—"

"Caroline," John's voice says. I look. There is no John smell. John is not here. Only John's voice is here. "You have no legal grounds. This man is allowed to accompany you, according to the protection contract you signed. *You* signed it, my dear. As for quitting the City Ballet . . . that's up to you. But while you dance for us, Angel goes where you do. If he gets too excited over not seeing you, the biosignal triggers. Just where were you going that you didn't want Angel with you?"

"To turn tricks on street corners!" Caroline yells. "And I bet he has a homing device embedded in him, too, doesn't he?"

She smells very angry. She is angry at me. I lie on the floor. I put my paws on my head. It is not happy here.

The man says, "Departing the apartment now, sir." He leaves. He takes the small box.

Caroline sits on the floor. Her back is against the door. She looks at me. My paws are on my head. Caroline smells angry.

Nothing happens.

A little later Caroline says, "I guess it's you and me, then. They set it up that way. I'm stuck with you."

I do not move my paws. She still smells angry.

"All right, let's try another approach. Disarm the enemy from within. Psychological sabotage. You don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you? What did they give you, a five-year-old's IQ? Angel . . . "

I look at Caroline. She says my right name.

" . . . tell me about Sam's cat."

"What?"

"Sam's cat. You said that first day you came home with me that you smelled a cat on Sam, the day doorman. Do you still smell it? Can you tell what kind of cat it is?"

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I am confused. Caroline says nice words. Caroline smells angry. Her back is too straight. Her fur is wrong.

"Is it a male cat or a female cat? Can you tell that?"

"A female cat," I say. I remember the cat smell. My muscles itch.

"Did you want to chase it?"

"I must never chase cats. I must protect Caroline."

Caroline's smell changes. She leans close to my ear.

"But did you *want* to chase it, Angel? Did you want to get to behave like a dog?"

"I want to protect Caroline."

"Hoo boy. They did a job on *you*, didn't they, boy?"

The words are too hard. Caroline still smells a little angry. I do not understand.

"It's nothing compared to what they're doing in South America and Europe," she says. Her body shakes.

"Are you hurt?" I say.

Caroline puts a hand on my back. The hand is very soft. She says no words.

I am happy. Caroline talks to me. She tells me about dancing. Caroline is a dancer. She jumps and runs in circles. She stands high on her hind legs. People come in cars to watch her. The people are happy when Caroline dances.

We walk outside. I protect Caroline. We go many places. Caroline gives me cake and hot dogs. There are many smells. Sometimes Caroline and I follow the smells. We see many dogs and many cats. The man with the small box comes with us sometimes. John says the man is safe.

"What if I tell Angel you're not 'safe'?" Caroline says to the man. He follows us on a long walk. "What if I order him to tear you limb from limb?" She smells angry again.

"You don't have programming override capacity. The biochip augmenting his bioenhancement is very specific, Ms. Olson. I'm hardwired in."

"I'll bet," Caroline says. "Did anybody ask Angel if he wants this life?"

The man smiles.

We go to Lincoln Center every day. Caroline dances there. She dances in the day. She dances at night. More people watch at night.

John asks me where Caroline and I go. Every day I tell him.

Nobody tries to touch Caroline. I protect her.

"I can't do it," Caroline tells a man on the street corner. The man stands very close to Caroline. I growl soft. "For God's sake, Stan, don't touch me. The dog. And I'm probably being watched."

"Do they care *that* much?"

"I could blow the whistle on the whole unofficial charade," Caroline says. She smells tired. "No matter what Privitera's delusions are. But then we'd lose our chance, wouldn't we?"

"Thanks for the time," the man says, loud. He smiles. He walks away.

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Later John says, "Who did Caroline talk to?"
"A man," I say. "He wants the time."
Later Caroline says, "Angel, we're going tonight to see my mother."

4.

Demonstrators dyed the fountain at Lincoln Center blood red.

They marched around the gruesome jets of water, shouting and resisting arrest. I sprinted across the plaza, trying to get there to see which side they were on before the police carted all of them away. Even from this distance I could tell they weren't dancers, not with those thick bodies. The electronic placards dissolved from HOW MANY MUST DIE FROM DENYING EVOLUTION! to FREE MEDICAL RESEARCH FROM GOVERNMENT STRAIGHTJACKETS! to MY BODY BELONGS TO **ME!** Pro-human bioenhancement, then. A holograph projector, which a cop was shutting down, spewed out a ten-foot high holo of Jane and June Welsh, Siamese twins who had been successfully separated only after German scientists had bioenhanced their bodies to force alterations in major organs. The holo loop showed the attached twins dragging each other around, followed by the successfully separated twins waving gaily. The cop did something and Jane and June disappeared.

"They died," I said to a demonstrator, a slim boy wearing a FREE MY BODY! button. "Ultimately, neither of their hearts could stand the stress of bioenhancement."

He glared at me. "That was their risk to take, wasn't it?"

"Their combined IQ didn't equal your weight. How could they evaluate risk?"

"This is a *revolution*, lady. In any revolution you have casualties that—" A cop grabbed his arm. The boy took a wild swing at him and the cop pressed his nerve gun to the boy's neck. He dropped peacefully, smiling.

Abruptly more people gathered, some of them wilier than the boy. Demonstrators stood with their hands on their heads, singing slogans. Media robocams zoomed in from the sky; the live crews would be here in minutes. A group of counter-demonstrators formed across the plaza, in front of the Met. I backed away slowly, hands on my head, not singing—and stopped abruptly halfway across the chaotic plaza.

An old woman in a powerchair was watching the demonstration with the most intense expression I had ever seen. It was as if she were watching a horrifying execution, judging it judiciously as art. Bodyguards flanked the chair. She wore an expensive, pale blue suit and large, perfectly matched pearls. Her wrinkled, cold face was completely familiar. This was how Caroline Olson would look in forty years, if she refused all cosmetic treatment.

She caught me watching her. Her expression didn't change. It passed over me as if I didn't exist.

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I took the chance. "Ms. Olson?"

She didn't deny the name. "Yes?"

"I'm a reporter with *New York Now,* doing an article on the New York City Ballet. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your daughter Caroline, if that's all right."

"I never give interviews."

"Yes, ma'am. Just a few informal questions—you must be so proud of Caroline. But are you worried about her safety in light of the recent so-called ballerina murders?"

She shocked me. She smiled. "No, not at all."

"You're *not?*"

She gazed at the break-up of the demonstration. "Do you know the work on dancers' bodies they're doing in Berlin?"

"No, I—"

"Then you have no business interviewing anyone on the subject." She watched the last of the demonstrators being dragged away by the cops. "The New York City Ballet is finished. The future of the art lies with bioenhancement."

I must have looked like a fish, staring at her with my mouth working. "But Caroline is the prima ballerina, she's only twenty-six—"

"Caroline had a good run. For a dancer." She made a signal, an imperious movement of her hand, and one of the bodyguards turned her chair and wheeled it away.

I trotted after it. "But, Ms. Olson, are you saying you think your daughter and her whole company *should* be replaced by bioenhanced dancers because they can achieve higher lifts, fewer injuries, more spectacular turn out—"

"I never give interviews," she said, and the other bodyguard moved between us.

I gazed after her. She had spoken about Caroline as if her daughter were an obsolete Buick. It took me a moment to remember to pull out a notebook and tell it what she had said.

Someone dumped something into the fountain. Immediately the red disappeared and the water spouted clear. A bioenhanced dog trotted over and lapped at the water, the dog's owner patiently holding the leash while his pink-furred, huge-eyed poodle drank its fill.

After an hour at a library terminal at *New York Now,* I knew that Anna Olson was a major contributor to the American Ballet Theater but not to the New York City Ballet, where her daughter had chosen to dance. Caroline's father was dead. He had left his widow an East Side mansion, three Renoirs, and a fortune invested in Peruvian sugar, Japanese weather-control equipment, and German pharmaceuticals. According to *Ballet News,* mother and daughter were estranged. To find out more than that, I'd need professional help.

Michael didn't want to do it. "There's no money for that kind of research, Susan. Not to even mention the ethics involved."

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"Oh, come on, Michael. It's no worse than using criminal informers for any other story."

"This isn't your old newspaper job, Susie. We're a feature magazine, remember? We don't use informants, and we don't do investigative reporting." He leaned against his desk, his peeled-egg face troubled.

"The magazine doesn't have to do any investigating at all. Just give me the number. I know you know it. If I'd been doing the job I should have for the last two years instead of sulking because I hate New York, I'd know it, too. Just the number, Michael. That's all. Neither you nor the magazine will even be mentioned."

He ran his hand through his hair. For the first time, I noticed that it was thinning. "All right. But, Susan—don't get obsessed. For your own sake." He looked at the picture of his daughter doing time in Rock Mountain.

I called the Robin Hood and arranged to see him. He was young—they all are—maybe as young as twenty, operating out of a dingy apartment in Tribeca. I couldn't judge his equipment: beyond basic literacy, computers are as alien to me as dancers. Like dancers, they concentrate on one aspect of the world, dismissing the rest.

The Robin Hood furnished the usual proofs that he could tap into private databanks, that he could access government records, and that his translation programs could handle international airline d-bases. He promised a two-day turnaround. The price was astronomical by my standards, although probably negligible by his. I transferred the credits from my savings account, emptying it.

I said, "You do know that the original Robin Hood transferred goods for free?"

He said, not missing a beat, "The original Robin Hood didn't have to pay for a Seidman-Nuwer encrypter."

I really hadn't expected him to know who the original Robin Hood was.

When I got home, Deborah had fallen asleep across her bed, still dressed in practice clothes. The toes of her tights were bloody. A new pair of toe shoes was shoved between the bedroom door and the door jamb; she softened the stiff boxes by slamming the door on them. There were three E-mail messages for her from SAB, but I erased them all. I covered her, closed her door, and let her sleep.

I met with the Robin Hood two days later. He handed me a sheaf of hardcopy. "The City Ballet injury records show two injuries for Caroline Olson in the last four years, which is as far back as the files are kept. One shin splint, one pulled ligament. Of course, if she had other injuries and saw a private doctor, that wouldn't show up on their records, but if she did see one it wasn't anybody on the City Ballet Recommended Physician List. I checked that."

"Two injuries? In four *years?*"

"That's what the record shows. These here are four-year records of City Ballet bioscans. All negative. Nobody shows any bioenhancement, not

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even Jennifer Lang. These are the City Ballet attendance figures over ten years, broken down by subscription and single-event tickets."

I was startled; the drop in attendance over the last two years was more dramatic than the press had ever indicated.

"This one is Mrs. Anna Olson's tax return for last year. All that income—all of it—is from investments and interest, and none of it is tied up in trusts or entails. She controls it all, and she can waste the whole thing if she wants to. You asked about unusual liquidation of stock in the last ten years: There wasn't any. There's no trust fund for Caroline Olson. This is Caroline's tax return—only her salary with City Ballet, plus guest appearance fees. Hefty, but nothing like what the old lady controls.

"This last is the air flight stuff you wanted: No flights on major commercial airlines out of the country for Caroline in the last six years, except when the City Ballet did its three international tours, and then Caroline flew pretty much with everybody else in the group. Of course if she did go to Rio or Copenhagen or Berlin, she could have gone by chartered plane or private jet. My guess is private jet. Those aren't required to file passenger lists."

It wasn't what I'd hoped to find. Or rather, it was half of what I'd hoped. No dancer is injured that seldom. It just doesn't happen. I pictured Caroline Olson's amazing extension, her breathtaking leaps; she reached almost the height expected of male superstars. And her crippled horror of a mother had huge amounts of money. *"Caroline had a good run."*

I would bet my few remaining dollars that Caroline Olson was bioenhanced, no matter what her bioscans said. Jennifer Lang's had been negative, too. Apparently the DNA hackers were staying one step ahead of the DNA security checkers. Although it was odd that the records didn't show a single dancer trying to get away with bioenhancement, not even once, even in the face of Privitera's fervency. There are always some people who value their own career advancement over the received faith.

But I had assumed that Caroline would have needed to leave the country. Bioenhancement labs are large, full of sensitive and costly and nonportable equipment and dozens of technicians. Not easy to hide. Police investigators had traced both Jennifer Lang and Nicole Heyer to Danish labs. I didn't think one could exist illegally in New York.

Maybe I was wrong.

The Robin Hood watched me keenly. In the morning light from the window he looked no older than Deborah. He had thick brown hair, nice shoulders. I wondered if he had a life outside his lab. So many of them didn't.

"Thanks," I said.

"Susan—"

"What?"

He hesitated. "I don't know what you're after with this data. But I've worked with friends of Michael's before. If you're thinking about trying to leverage anything to do with human bioenhancement . . . "

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"Yeah?"

"Don't." He looked intently at his console. "That's out of both our leagues. Magazine reporters are very small against the kind of high-stakes shit those guys are into."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. And then, on impulse, "Would you by any chance like a home-cooked meal? I have a daughter about your age, seventeen, she's a dancer. . . ."

He stared at me in disbelief. He shook his head. "You're a *client,* Susan. And anyway, I'm twenty-six. And I'm married." He shook his head again. "And if you don't know enough not to ask a Robin Hood to dinner, you *really* don't know enough to mess around with bioenhancement. That stuff's life or death."

Life or death. Enough for a bioenhancement corporation to murder two dancers?

But I rejected that idea. It was always too easy to label the corporations the automatic bad guys. That was the stuff of cheap holovids. Most corporate types I knew just tried to keep ahead of the IRS.

I said, "Most life-and-death stuff originates at home."

I could feel him shaking his head as I left, but I didn't turn around.

5.

Caroline and I ride in a taxi. It is late at night. We ride across the park. Then we ride more. Caroline says words to a gate. A man opens the gate to a very big house. He smells surprised. He wears pajamas. "Miss Caroline!"

"Hello, Seacomb. Is my mother in?"

"She's asleep, of course. If there's an emergency—"

"No emergency. But my apartment pipes sprung a leak and I'll be spending the night here. This is my dog, Angel. Angel, Seacomb is safe."

"Of course, miss," Seacomb says. He smells very unhappy. "It's just—"

"Just that you have orders not to let me use this house?"

"No, miss," the man says. "My orders are to let you use the house as you choose. Only—"

"Of course they are," Caroline says. "My mother wants me to grovel back here. She's been planning for that. Well, here I am. Only she's taken a sleeping pill and is out cold until morning, right?"

"Yes, miss," the man says. He smells very unhappy. There are no cats or dogs in this place, but there are mice. The mice droppings smell interesting.

"I'll sleep in the downstairs study. And, oh, Seacomb, I'm expecting guests. Please disable the electric gate. They'll use the back entrance, and I'll let them in myself. You needn't take any trouble about it."

"It's no trouble to—"

"I said I'll let them in myself."

"Yes, miss," Seacomb says. He smells very very unhappy.

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He leaves. Caroline and I go down stairs. Caroline drinks. She gives me water. I smell a mouse in a cupboard. My ears raise. There are interesting things here.

"Well, Angel, here we are at my mother's house. Do you remember your mother, boy?"

"No," I say. I am confused. The words are a little hard.

"There are some people coming for a party. Some dancers. Kristine Meyers is coming. You remember Kristine Meyers?"

"Yes," I say. Kristine Meyers dances with Caroline. They run in circles and jump high. Caroline jumps higher.

"We're going to talk about dancing, Angel. This is a prettier house than mine to talk about dancing. This is a good house for a party, which is what we're going to have. My mother lets me use her house for parties. Remember that, boy."

Later Caroline opens the door. Some people stand there. We go into the basement. Kristine Meyers is there. She smells frightened. Some men are with her. They carry papers. They talk a long time.

"Here, Angel, have a pretzel," a man says. "It's a party."

Some people dance to a radio. Kristine smells angry and confused. Her fur stands up. Caroline says words to her. The words are hard. The words are long. I have a pretzel. Nobody touches Caroline.

We are there all night. Kristine cries.

"Her boyfriend is gone," Caroline says to me.

In early morning we go home. We go in a taxi. Somebody is sick in the taxi yesterday. It smells bad. Caroline sleeps. I sleep. Caroline does not go to class.

In the afternoon we go to Lincoln Center. Kristine is there. She sleeps on a couch in the lounge. Caroline dances with Dmitri.

John Cole bends close to my ear. "You went out with Caroline all last night."

"Yes," I say.

"Where did you go?"

"We go to Caroline's mother's house. We go to a party. Caroline's mother lets Caroline use her house for parties."

"Who was at this party?"

"Dancers. Kristine is at the party. Kristine is safe."

John looks at Kristine. She still sleeps on the couch.

"Who else was at the party? What did they do?"

I remember hard. "Dancers are at the party. We eat pretzels. We talk about dancing. People dance to the radio. Nobody touches Caroline. There is music."

John's body relaxes. "Good," he says. "Okay."

"I like pretzels," I say. But John does not give me a pretzel today.

Caroline and I walk in the park. There are many good smells. Caroline sits under a tree. The long fur on her head falls down. She pats my head. She gives me a cookie.

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"It's easy for you, isn't it, Angel?" Caroline says.

I say, "The words are hard."

"You like being a dog? A bioenhanced servant dog?"

"The words are hard."

"Are you happy, Angel?"

"I am happy. I love Caroline."

She pats my head again. The sun is warm. The smells are good. I close my eyes.

"I love to dance," Caroline says. "And I hate that I love it."

I open my eyes. Caroline smells unhappy.

"Goddamn it, I love it anyway. I do. Even though it wasn't my choice. You didn't choose what you are, either, did you, Angel? They goddamn made you what they needed you to be. Yet you love it. And for you there's no account due."

The words are too hard. I put my nose into Caroline's front legs. She puts her front legs around me. She holds me tight.

"It's not *fair*," Caroline whispers into my fur.

Caroline does not hold me yesterday. She holds me today. I am happy. But Caroline smells unhappy.

Where is my happy if Caroline smells unhappy?

I do not understand.

6.

Deborah didn't get cast in *Nutcracker*. An SAB teacher told her she might want to consider auditioning for one of the regional companies rather than City Ballet—a death sentence, from her point of view. She told me this quietly, without histrionics, sitting cross-legged on the floor sewing ribbons onto a pair of toe shoes. Not wanting to say the wrong thing, I said nothing, contenting myself with touching her hair, coiled at the nape of her neck into the ballerina bun. Two days later she told me she was dropping out of high school.

"I need the time to dance," she said. "You just don't understand, Mom."

The worst thing I could do was let her make me into the enemy. "I do understand, honey. But there will be lots of time to dance after you finish school. And if you don't—"

"Finishing is a year away! I can't afford the time. I have to take more classes, work harder, get asked into the company. *This year*. I'm sorry, Mom, but I just can't waste my time on all that useless junk in school."

I locked my hands firmly on my lap. "Well, let's look at this reasonably. Suppose after all you do get asked to join the company—"

"I *will* be asked! I'll work so hard they'll have to ask me!"

"All right. Then you dance with them until, say, you're thirty-five. At thirty-five you have over half your life left. You saw what happened to Carla Cameri and Maura Jones." Carla's hip had disintegrated; Maura's Achilles tendon had forced her into retirement at thirty-two. Both of

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them worked in a clothing store, for pitifully small salaries. Dancers didn't get pensions unless they'd been with the same company for ten years, a rarity in the volatile world of artistic directors with absolute power, who often fired dancers because they were remaking a company into a different "look."

I pressed my point. "What will you do at thirty or thirty-five with your body debilitated and without even a high school education?"

"I'll teach. I'll coach. I'll go back to school. Oh, Mom, how do I know? That's decades away! I have to think about what I need to do for my career now!"

No mother love is luminous enough to make a seventeen-year-old see herself at thirty-five.

I said, "No, Deborah. You can't quit school. I'd have to sign for you, and I won't."

"Daddy already did."

We looked at each other. It was too late; she'd already made me into the enemy. Because she needed one.

She said, in a sudden burst of passion, "You don't understand! You never felt about your job the way I feel about ballet! You never loved anything enough to give up everything else for it!" She rushed to her room and slammed the door. I put my head in my hands.

After a while, I started to laugh. I couldn't help it. *Never loved anything enough to give up everything else for it.*

Right.

Pers wasn't available to yell at. I phoned six times. I left messages on E-mail, even though I had no idea whether he had a terminal. I made the trip out of the protected zone to his apartment. The area was worse than I remembered: glass, broken machinery, shit, drug paraphernalia. The cab driver was clearly eager to leave, but I made him wait while I questioned a kid who came out of Pers's building. The boy, about eight, had a long pus-encrusted cut down one cheek.

"Do you know when Pers Anders usually comes home? He lives in 2C."

The kids stared at me, expressionless. The cab driver leaned out and said, "One more minute and I'm leaving, lady."

I pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and held it close to me. "When does Pers Anders usually come home?"

"He moved."

"Moved?"

"Left his stuff. He say he go someplace better than this shithole. I hear him say it. Don't you try to prong me, lady. You give me that money."

"Do you know the address?"

He greeted this with the scorn it deserved. I gave him the money.

Deborah left school and started spending all day and much of the night at Lincoln Center. Finally I walked over to SAB and caught her just before a partnering class. She had twisted a bright scarf around her

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waist, over her leotard, and her sweaty hair curled in tendrils where it had escaped her bun.

"Deborah, why didn't you tell me your father had moved?"

She looked wary, wiping her face with a towel to gain time. "I didn't think you'd care. You hate him."

"As long as you still visit him, I need to know where he is."

She considered this. Finally she gave me the address. It was a good one, in the new luxury condos where the old main library had been.

"How can Pers afford *that?*"

"He didn't say. Maybe he's got a job. Mom, I have class."

"Pers is allergic to jobs."

"Mom, Mr. Privitera is teaching this class *himself!*"

I didn't stay to watch class. On the way out, I passed Privitera, humming to himself on his way to elate or cast down his temple virgins.

The police had released no new information on the ballerina murders.

I turned in the article on the New York City Ballet. It seemed to me neither good nor bad; everything important about the subject didn't fit the magazine's focus. There weren't too many metaphors. Michael read it without comment. I worked on an article about computerized gambling, and another about holographic TV. I voted in the presidential election. I bought Christmas presents.

But every free minute, all autumn and early winter, I spent at the magazine library terminals, reading about human bioenhancement, trying to guess what Caroline Olson was having done to herself. What might someday lie in Deborah's future, if she were as big a fool then as she was being now.

"Don't get obsessed," Michael had said.

The literature was hard to interpret. I wasn't trained in biology, and as far as I could see, the cutting-edge research was chaotic, with various discoveries being reported one month, contradicted the next. All the experiments were carried out in other countries, which meant they were reported in other languages, and I didn't know how far to trust the biases of the translators. Most of them seemed to be other scientists in the same field. This whole field seemed to me like a canoe rushing toward the falls: nobody in charge, both oars gone, control impossible.

I read about splendid, "revolutionary" advances in biological nanotechnology that always seemed under development, or not quite practical yet, or hotly disputed by people practicing other kinds of revolutionary advances. I read about genesplicing retroviruses and setting them loose in human organs to accomplish potentially wonderful things. Elimination of disease. Perfect metabolic functioning. Immortality. The studies were always concerned with one small, esoteric facet of scientific work, but the "Conclusions" sections were often grandiose, speculating wildly.

I even picked up hints of experimental work on altering genetic makeup *in vitro,* instead of trying to reshape adult bodies. Some scientists seemed to think this might actually be easier to accomplish. But nowhere

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in the world was it legal to experiment on an embryo not destined for abortion, an embryo that would go on to become a human being stuck with the results of arbitrary and untested messing around with his basic cellular blueprints. Babies were not tinker toys—or dogs. The Copenhagen Accord, signed twenty-seven years ago by most technologically civilized countries, had seen to that. The articles on genetic modification *in vitro* were carefully speculative.

But then so was nearly everything else I read. The proof was walking around in inaccessible foreign hospitals, or living in inaccessible foreign cities—the anonymity of the experimental subjects seemed to be a given, which also made me wonder how many of them were experimental casualties. And if so, of what kind.

Michael wasn't going to want any article built on this tentative speculation. Lawsuits would loom. But I was beyond caring what Michael wanted.

I learned that the Fifth International Conference on Human Bioenhancement was going to be held in Paris in late April. After paying the Robin Hood, I had no money left for a trip to Paris. Michael would have to pay for it. I would have to give him a reason.

One night in January I did a stupid thing. I went alone to Lincoln Center and waited by the stage door of the New York State Theater. Caroline Olson came out at 11:30, dressed in jeans and parka, accompanied only by a huge black Doberman on the most nominal of leashes. They walked south on Broadway, to an all-night restaurant. I sat myself at the next table.

For the past few months, her reviews had not been good. "A puzzling and disappointing degeneration," said *The New Yorker*. "Technical sloppiness not associated with either Olson or Privitera," said *Dance Magazine*. "This girl is in trouble, and Anton Privitera had better find out what kind of trouble and move to correct it," said the *Times On-Line*.

Caroline ate abstractedly, feeding bits to the dog, oblivious to the frowns of a fastidious waiter who was undoubtedly an out-of-work actor. Up close, the illusion of power and beauty I remembered from *Coppelia* evaporated. She looked like just another mildly pretty, self-absorbed, overly thin young woman. Except for the dog, the waiter/actor didn't give her a second glance.

"We go now?" the dog said.

I choked on my sandwich. Caroline glanced at me absently. "Soon, Angel."

She went on eating. I left, waited for her, and followed her home. She and the dog lived on Central Park South, a luxury building where the late-night electronic surveillance system greeted them both by name.

I took a cab home. Deborah had never mentioned that the City Ballet prima ballerina was protected by a bioenhanced Doberman. She knew I'd written the story about the ballerina murders. Anton Privitera hadn't mentioned it, either, in his press conference about dancer safety. I wondered why not. While I was parceling out wonder, I devoted some to

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the question of City Ballet's infrequent, superficial, and always-positive bioscans. Shouldn't a company devoted to the religion of "natural art" be more zealous about ferreting out heretics?

Unless, of course, somebody didn't really want to know.

Privitera? But that was hard to reconcile with his blazing, intolerant sincerity.

It occurred to me that I had never seen an admittedly bioenhanced dancer perform. Until tonight, I'd gone to finished performances rarely and only with Deborah, who of course scorned such perverts and believed that they had nothing to teach her.

She was out when I got back to our apartment. Each week, it seemed, she was gone more. I fell asleep, waiting for her to come home.

7.

Snow falls. It is cold. Caroline and I walk to Lincoln Center. A man takes Caroline's purse. He runs. Caroline says "Shit!" Then she says, "Angel? Go stop him!" She drops my leash.

I run and jump on the man. He screams. I do not hurt him. Caroline says *stop him*. She does not say *attack him*. So I stand on the man's chest and growl and nip at his foreleg. He brings out a knife. Then I bite him. He drops the knife and screams again. The police come.

"Holy shit," Caroline says to me. "You really do that. You really do."

"I protect Caroline," I say.

Caroline talks to police. Caroline talks to reporters. I get a steak to eat.

I am happy.

The snow goes away. The snow is there many many days, but it goes away. We visit Caroline's mother's house for two more parties in the basement. It gets warm in the park. Ducks live in the water again. Flowers grow. Caroline says not to dig up flowers.

I lie backstage. Caroline dances on stage. John and Mr. Privitera stand beside me. They smell unhappy. John's shoes smell of tar and food and leaves and cats and other good things. I sniff John's shoes.

"She looks exhausted," John says. "She's giving it everything she's got, but it's just not there, Anton."

Mr. Privitera says no words. He watches Caroline dance.

"William Scholes attacked again in the *Times*. He said that watching her had become painful—'like watching a reed grown stiff and brittle.'"

"I will talk to her again," Mr. Privitera says.

"Scholes called the performance 'a travesty,'" John says.

Caroline comes backstage. She limps. She wipes her face with a towel. She smells afraid.

"Dear, I'd like to see you," Mr. Privitera says.

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We go to Caroline's dressing room. Caroline sits down. She trembles. Her body smells sick. I growl. Caroline puts a hand on my head.

Mr. Privitera says, "First of all, dear, I have good news for all of us. The police have caught that unspeakable murderer who killed Jennifer Lang and the ABT dancer."

Caroline sits up a little straighter. Her smell changes. "They did! How?"

"They caught him breaking into the Plaza Hotel room where Marie D'Arbois is staying while she guests with ABT."

"Is Marie—"

"She's fine. She wasn't alone, she had a lover or something with her. The madman just got careless. The police are holding back the details. Marie, of course, is another of those bioenhanced dancers. I don't know if you ever saw her dance."

"I did," Caroline says. "I thought she was wonderful."

Caroline and Mr. Privitera look hard at each other. They smell ready to attack. But they do not attack. I am confused. Mr. Privitera is safe. He may touch Caroline.

Mr. Privitera says, "We must all be grateful to the police. Now there's something else I need to discuss with you, dear."

Caroline closes her hand on my fur. She says, "Yes?"

"I want you to take a good long rest, dear. You know your dancing has deteriorated. You tell me you're not doing drugs or working sketchily, and I believe you. Sometimes it helps a dancer to take a rest from performing. Take class, eat right, get strong. In the fall we'll see."

"You're telling me you're cutting me from the summer season at Saratoga."

"Yes, dear."

Caroline is quiet. Then she says, "There's nothing wrong with me. My timing has just been a little off, that's all."

"Then take the summer to work on your timing. And everything else."

Mr. Privitera and Caroline look hard at each other again. Caroline's hand still pulls my fur. It hurts a little. I do not move.

Mr. Privitera leans close to Caroline. "Listen, dear. *Jewels* was one of your best roles. But *tonight* . . . and not just *Jewels*. You wobbled and wavered through *Starscape*. Your Nikiya in the 'Shades' section of *La Bayadère* was . . . embarrassing. There is no other word. You danced as if you had never learned the steps. And you couldn't even complete the *Don Quixote pas de deux* at the gala."

"I fell! Dancers get injured all the time! My injury rate compared to—"

"You've missed rehearsals and even performances," Mr. Privitera says. He stands up. "I'm sorry, dear. Take the summer. Rest. Work. In the fall, we'll see."

Caroline says, "What about the last two weeks of the season?"

Mr. Privitera says, "I'm sorry, dear."

He walks to the door. He puts his hand on the door. He says, "Oh, at least you won't have to be burdened with that dog anymore. Now that

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the madman's been caught, I'll have John notify the protection agency to come pick it up."

Caroline raises her head. Her fur all stands up. She smells angry. Soon she runs out the door. Mr. Privitera is gone. She runs to the offices. "John! John, you bastard!"

The office hall is dark. The doors do not open. John is not here.

Caroline runs up steps to the offices. She falls. She falls down some of the steps and hits the wall. She lies on the floor. She holds her hind foot and smells hurt.

"Angel," she says. "Go get somebody to help me."

I go to the lounge. One dancer is there. She says, "Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't know that anybody—Angel?"

"Caroline is hurt," I say. "Come. Come fast."

She comes. Caroline says, "Who are you? No, wait—Deborah, right? From the corps?"

"No, I'm not . . . I haven't been invited to join the corps yet. I'm a student at SAB. I'm just here a lot. . . . Are you hurt? Can you stand?"

"Help me up," Caroline says. "Angel, Deborah is safe."

Deborah tries to pick up Caroline. Caroline makes a little noise. She cannot stand. Deborah gets John. He picks up Caroline.

"It's nothing," she says. "No doctor. Just get me a cab . . . dammit, John, don't fuss, it's nothing!" She looks at John hard. "You want to take Angel away from me."

John smells surprised. He says, "Who told you that?"

"His Majesty himself. But now you've decided whatever you thought I was doing so privately doesn't matter any more, is that right?"

"It's a mistake. Of course you can keep the dog. Anton doesn't understand," John says. He smells angry.

"No, I'll just bet he doesn't," Caroline says. "You might have picked a kinder way to tell me I'm through at City Ballet."

"You're not through, Caroline," John says. Now he smells bad. His words are not right. He smells like the man who takes Caroline's purse.

"Right," Caroline says. She sits in the cab.

Deborah steps back. She smells surprised.

"I'm keeping the dog," Caroline says. "So we're in agreement, aren't we, John? Come on, Angel. Let's go home."

We go to class. Caroline cannot dance. She tries and then stops. She sits in a corner. Mr. Privitera sits in another corner. Caroline watches Deborah. The dancers raise one hind leg. They spin and jump.

Madame holds up her hand. The music stops. "Deborah, let us see that again, *s'il vous plait*. Alone."

The other dancers move away. They look at each other. They smell surprised. The music starts again and Deborah raises one hind leg very high. She spins and jumps.

Mr. Privitera says, "Let me see the bolero from *Coppelia*. Madame says you know it."

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"Y-yes," Deborah says. She dances alone.
"Very nice, dear," Mr. Privitera says. "You are much improved."
The other dancers look at each other again.
Everybody dances.
Caroline watches Deborah hard.

8.

Deborah's face looked like every Christmas morning in the entire world. She grabbed both my hands. "They invited me to join the company!"

My suitcase lay open on the bed, surrounded by discarded clothes I wasn't taking to the bioenhancement conference in Paris. My daughter picked up a pile of spidersilk blouses and hurled them into the air. In the soft April air from the open window the filmy, artificial material drifted and danced. "I can't believe it! They asked me to join the company! I'm *in!*"

She whirled around the tiny room, rising on toe in her street shoes, laughing and exclaiming. My silence went unnoticed. Deborah did an *arabesque* to the bedpost; then plopped herself down on my best dress. "Don't you want to know what happened, Mom?"

"What happened, Deborah?"

"Well, Mr. Privitera came to watch class, and Madame asked me to repeat the variation alone. God, I thought I'd die. Then *Mr. Privitera*—not Madame—asked me to do the bolero from *Coppelia*. For an awful minute I couldn't remember a single step. Then I did, and he said it was very nice! He said I was much improved!"

Accolades from the king. But even in my numbness I could see there was something she wasn't telling me.

"I thought you told me the company doesn't choose any new dancers this close to the end of the season?"

She sobered immediately. "Not usually. But Caroline Olson was fired. She missed rehearsals and performances, and she wasn't even taking the trouble to prepare her roles. Her reviews have been awful."

"I saw them," I said.

Deborah looked at me sharply. "Ego, I guess. Caroline's always been sort of a bitch. So apparently they're not letting her go to Saratoga, because Tina Patrochov and a guest artist are dividing her roles, and Mr. Privitera told Jill Kerrigan to learn Tina's solo from *Sleeping Beauty*. So that left a place in the corps de ballet, and they chose me!"

I had had enough time to bring myself to say it.

"Congratulations, sweetheart."

"When does your plane for Paris leave?"

This non-sequitur—if it was that—turned me back to my packing. "Seven tonight."

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"And you'll be gone ten days. You'll have a great time in Paris. Maybe the next time the company goes on tour, I'll go with them!"

She whirled out of the room.

I sat at the end of the bed, holding onto the bedpost. When Deborah was three, she'd wanted to ride on a camel. Somehow it had become an obsession. She talked about camels in daycare, at dinnertime, at bedtime. She drew pictures of camels, misshapen things with one huge hump. Camels were in short supply in St. Louis. Ignore it, everyone said, kids forget these things, she'll get over it. Deborah never forgot. She didn't get over it. Pers had just left us, and I was consumed with the anxiety of a single parent. Finally I paid a friend to tie a large wad of hay under a blanket on his very old, very swaybacked horse. A Peruvian camel, I told my three-year-old. A very special kind. You can have a ride.

"That's not a camel," Deborah had said, with nostril-lifted disdain. "That's a heffalunt!"

I read last week in *World* that the animal-biotech scientists have built a camel with the flexible trunk of an elephant. The trunk can lift up to forty-five pounds. It is expected to be a useful beast of burden in the Sahara.

I finished packing for Paris.

Paris in April was an unending gray drizzle. The book and software stalls along the Seine kept up their electronic weather shields, giving them the hazy, streaming-gutter look of abandoned outhouses. The gargoyles on Notre Dame looked insubstantial in the rain, irrelevant in the face of camels with trunks. The French, as usual, conspired to make Americans—especially Americans who speak only rudimentary French—feel crass and barbaric. My clothes were wrong. My desire for a large breakfast was wrong. The Fifth International Conference on Human Bioenhancement had lost my press credentials.

The conference was held in one of the huge new hotels in Neuilly, near the EuroDisney Gene Zoo. I couldn't decide if this was an attempt to provide entertainment or irony. Three hundred scientists and doctors, a hundred press, and at least that many industrial representatives, plus groupies, thronged the hotel. The scientists presented papers; the industrial reps, mostly from biotech or pharmaceutical firms, presented "infoforums." The moment I walked in, carrying provisional credentials, I felt the tension, a peculiar kind of tension instantly recognizable to reporters. Something big was going on. Big and unpleasant.

From the press talk in the bar I learned that the presentation to not miss was Thursday night by Dr. Gerard Taillebois of the Pasteur Research Institute, in conjunction with Dr. Greta Erbland of Steckel und Osterhoff. This pairing of a major research facility with a commercial biotech firm was common in Europe. Sometimes the addition of a hospital made it a triumvirate. A hand-written addendum on the program showed that the presentation had been moved from the Napoleon Room to the

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Grand Ballroom. I checked out the room; it was approximately the size of an airplane hangar. Hotel employees were setting up acres of chairs.

I asked a garçon to point out Dr. Taillebois to me. He was a tall, bald man in his sixties or seventies who looked like he hadn't slept or eaten in days.

Wednesday night I went to the Paris Opéra Ballet. The wet pavement in front of the Opéra House gleamed like black patent leather. Patrons dripped jewels and fur. This gala was why Michael had funded my trip; my first ballet article for *New York Now* had proved popular, despite its vapidity. Or maybe because of it. Tonight the famous French company was dancing an eclectic program, with guest artists from the Royal Ballet and the Kirov. Michael wanted five thousand words on the oldest ballet company in the world.

I watched bioenhanced British dancers perform the wedding *pas de deux* from *Sleeping Beauty,* with its famous fishdives; Danish soloists in twentieth-century dances by George Balanchine; French ballerinas in contemporary works by their brilliant choreographer Louis Dufrot. All of them were breathtaking. In the new ballets, especially choreographed for these bioenhanced bodies, the dancers executed sustained movements no natural body would have been capable of making at all, at a speed that never looked machinelike. Instead the dancers were flashes of light: lasers, optic signals, nerve impulses surging across the stage and triggering pleasure centers in the brains of the delighted audience.

I gaped at one *pas de trois* in which the male dancer lifted two women at once, holding them aloft in swallow lifts over his head, one on each palm, then turning them slowly for a full ninety seconds. It wasn't a bench-pressing stunt. It was the culmination of a yearning, lyrical dance, as tender as any in the great nineteenth century ballets. The female dancers were lowered slowly to the floor, and they both flowed through a *fouette of adage* as if they hadn't any bones.

Not one dancer had been replaced in the evening's program due to injury. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen a performance of the New York City Ballet without a last-minute substitution.

During intermission, profoundly depressed, I bought a glass of wine in the lobby. The eddying crowd receded for a moment, and I was face to face with Anna Olson, seated regally in her powerchair and flanked by her bodyguards. Holding tight to her hand was a little girl of five or six, dressed in a pink party dress and pink tights, with wide blue eyes, black hair, and a long slim neck. She might have been Caroline Olson twenty years ago.

"Ms. Olson," I said.

She looked at me coldly, without recognition.

"I'm Susan Matthews. We met at the private reception for Anton Privitera at Georgette Allen's," I lied.

"Yes?" she said, but her eyes raked me. My dress wasn't the sort that turned up at the private fundraisers of New York billionaires. I didn't give her a chance to cut me.

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"This must be your—" granddaughter? Caroline, an only child, had never interrupted her dancing career for pregnancy. Niece? Grandniece? "—your ward."

"Je m'appelle Marguerite," the child said eagerly. "Nous regardons le ballet."

"Do you study ballet, Marguerite?"

"Mais oui!" she said scornfully, but Anna Olson made a sign and the bodyguards deftly cut me off from both of them. By maneuvering around the edge of the hall, I caught a last, distant glimpse of Marguerite. She waited patiently in line to go back to her seat. Her small feet in pink ballet slippers turned out in a perfect fifth position.

Thursday afternoon I drove into Paris to rent an electronic translator for the presentation by Taillebois and Erbland. The translators furnished by the conference were long since claimed. People who had rented them for the opening talks simply hung onto them, afraid to miss anything. The Taillebois/Erbland presentation would include written handouts in French, English, German, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese, but not until the session was over. I was afraid to miss anything, either.

I couldn't find a electronic translator with a brand name I trusted. I settled for a human named Jean-Paul, from a highly recommended commercial agency. He was about four feet ten, with sad brown eyes and a face wrinkled into fantastic crevasses. He told me he had translated for Charles DeGaulle during the crisis in Algeria. I believed him. He looked older than God.

We drove back to Neuilly in the rain. I said, "Jean-Paul, do you like ballet?"

"Non," he said immediately. "It is too slippery an art for me."

"Slippery?"

"Nothing is real. Girls are spirits of the dead, or joyous peasants, or other silly things. Have you ever seen any real peasants, Mademoiselle? They are not joyous. And girls lighter than air land on stage with a thump!" He illustrated by smacking the dashboard with his palm. "Men die of love for those women. Nobody dies for love. They die for money, or hate, but not love. Non."

"But isn't all art no more than illusion?"

He shrugged. "Not all illusion is worth creating. Not silly illusions. Dancers wobbling on tippy toes . . . non, non."

I said carefully, "French dancers can be openly bioenhanced. Not like in the United States. To some of us, that gives the art a whole new excitement. Technical, if not artistic."

Jean-Paul shrugged again. "Anybody can be bioenhanced, if they have the money. Bioenhancement, by itself it does not impress me. My grandson is bioenhanced."

"What does he do?"

Jean-Paul twisted his body toward me in the seat of the car. "He is a soccer player! One of the best in the world! If you followed the sport you

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would know his name. Claude Despreaux. Soccer—now *there* is illusion worth creating!"

His tone was exactly Anton Privitera's, talking about ballet.

Thursday evening, just before the presentation, I finally caught Deborah at home. Her face on the phonevid was drawn and strained. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Mom. How's Paris?"

"Wet. Deborah, you're not telling me the truth."

"Everything's fine! I just . . . just had a complicated rehearsal today."

The corps de ballet does not usually demand complicated rehearsals. The function of the corps is to move gracefully behind the soloists and principal dancers; it's seldom allowed to do anything that will distract from their virtuosity. I said carefully, "Are you injured?"

"No, of course not. Look, I have to go."

"Deborah . . . "

"They're waiting for me!" The screen went blank.

Who was waiting for her?

When I called back, there was no answer.

I went to the Grand Ballroom. Jean-Paul had been holding both our seats, lousy ones, since noon. An hour later, the presentation still had not started.

The audience fidgeted, tense and muttering. Finally a woman dressed in a severe suit entered. She spoke German. Jean-Paul translated into my ear.

"Good evening. I am Katya Waggenschauser. I have an announcement before we begin. I regret to inform you that Dr. Taillebois will not appear. Dr. Taillebois . . . He. . . ." Abruptly she ran off the stage.

The muttering rose to an astonished roar.

A man walked on stage. The crowd quieted immediately. Jean-Paul translated from the French, "I am Dr. Valois of the Pasteur Institute. Shortly Dr. Erbland will begin the presentation. But I regret to inform you that Dr. Taillebois will not appear. There has been an unfortunate accident. Dr. Taillebois is dead."

The murmuring rose, fell again. I heard reporters whispering into camphones in six languages.

"In a few minutes Dr. Erbland will make her and Dr. Taillebois's presentation. Please be patient just a few moments longer."

Eventually someone introduced Dr. Erbland, a long and fulsome introduction, and she walked onto the stage. A thin, tall woman in her sixties, she looked shaken and pale. She opened by speaking about how various kinds of bioenhancement differed from each other in intent, procedure, and biological mechanism. Most bioenhancements were introduced into an adult body that had already finished growing. A few, usually aimed at correcting hereditary problems, were carried out on infants. Those procedures were somewhat closer to the kinds of genetic re-engineering—it was not referred to merely as "bioenhancement"—that produced new strains of animals. And as with animals, science had long

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known that it was possible to manipulate pre-embryonic human genes in the same way, *in vitro.*

The audience grew completely quiet.

In vitro work, Dr. Erbland said, offered by its nature fewer guides and guarantees. There were many coded redundancies in genetic information, and that made it difficult to determine long-term happenings. The human genome map, the basis of all embryonic re-engineering, had been complete for forty years, but "complete" was not the same as "understood." The body had many genetic behaviors that researchers were only just beginning to understand. No one could have expected that when embryonic re-engineering first began, as a highly experimental undertaking, that genetic identity would be so stubborn.

Stubborn? I didn't know what she meant. Apparently, neither did anybody else in the audience. People scarcely breathed.

This experimental nature of embryonic manipulation in humans did not, of course, stop experimentation, Dr. Erbland continued. Before such experimentation was declared illegal by the Copenhagen Accord, many laboratories around the world had advanced science with the cooperation of voluntary subjects. Completely voluntary, she said. She said it three times.

I wondered how an embryo volunteered.

These voluntary subjects had been re-engineered using variants of the same techniques that produced *in vitro* bioenhancements in other mammals. Her company, in conjunction with the Pasteur Research Institute, had been pioneers in the new techniques. For over thirty years.

Thirty years. My search of the literature had found nothing going back that far. At least not in the journals available on the standard scientific nets. If such "re-engineered" embryos had been allowed to fully gestate, and had survived, they were just barely within the cut-off date for legal existence. Were we talking about embryos or people here?

Dr. Erbland made a curious gesture: raising both arms from the elbow, then letting them fall. It looked almost like a plea. Was she making a public confession of breaking international law? Why would she do that?

Over such a long time, Dr. Erbland continued, the human genetic identity, encoded in "jumping genes" in many unsuspected redundant ways, reasserted itself. This was the subject of her and Dr. Taillebois's work. Unfortunately, the effect on the organism—completely unanticipated by anyone—could be biologically devastating. This first graphic showed basal DNA changes in a re-engineered embryo created twenty-five years ago. The subject, a male, was—

A holograph projected a complicated, three-dimensional genemap. The scientists in the audience leaned forward intently. The non-scientists looked at each other.

As the presentation progressed, anchored in graphs and formulas and genemap holos, it became clear even to me what Dr. Erbland was actually saying.

European geneticists had been experimenting on embryos as long as

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thirty years ago, and never stopped. They'd allowed some of those embryos to become people. Against international law, and without knowing the long-term effects. And now the long-term effects, like old bills, were coming due, and those people's bodies were destroying themselves at the genetic level.

We had engineered a bioenhanced cancer to replace the natural one we had conquered.

It was a few moments before I noticed that Jean-Paul had stopped translating. He sat like stone, his wrinkled face lengthened in sorrow.

The audience forgot this was a scientific conference. "How many people have been re-engineered at an embryonic level?" someone shouted in English. "Total number worldwide!"

Someone else shouted, *"¿Todos van a morir?"*

"Les lois internationales—"

"Der sagt—"

Dr. Erbland broke into a long, passionate speech, clearly not part of the prepared presentation. I caught the word "sagt" several times: *law.* I remembered that Dr. Erbland worked for a commercial biotech firm wholly owned by a pharmaceutical company.

The same company in which Anna Olson owned a fortune in stock.

Jean-Paul said quietly, "My grandson. Claude. He was one of those embryos. They told us it was safe. . . ."

I looked at the old man, slumped forward, and I couldn't find any sympathy for him. That appalled me. A cherished grandson. . . . But they had *agreed,* Claude's parents, to play Russian roulette with a child's life. In order to produce a superior soccer player. *"Soccer—now there is an illusion worth creating."*

I remembered Anna Olson at the demonstration by the Lincoln Center fountain: *"Caroline had a good run. For a dancer."* Caroline Olson, Deborah said, had been fired because she missed rehearsals and performances. The *Times* had called her last performance "a travesty." Because her body was eating itself at a genetic level, undetectable by the City Ballet bioscans that assumed you could compare new DNA patterns to the body's original, which no procedure completely erased. But for Caroline, the original itself had carried the hidden blueprint for destruction. For twenty-six years.

The ultimate ballet mother had made Caroline into what Anna Olson *needed* her to be. For as long as Caroline might last.

And then I remembered little Marguerite, standing with her perfect turn out in fifth position.

I stood and pushed my way to the exit. I had to get out of that room. Nobody else left. Dr. Erbland, rattled and afraid, tried to answer questions shouted in six languages. I shoved past a woman who was punching her neighbor. Gendarmes appeared as if conjured from the floorboards. Maybe that would be next.

The hardcopies of Dr. Taillebois's original presentation were stacked neatly on tables in the lobby. I took one in English. As I went out the

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door, I heard a gendarme say clearly to somebody, *"Oui, il s'a suicidé, Dr. Taillebois."*

I didn't want to stay an hour longer in Paris. I packed at the hotel and changed my ticket at Orly. On the plane home I made myself read the Taillebois/Erbland paper. Most of it was incomprehensible to me; what I understood was obscene. I kept seeing Marguerite in her pink ballet slippers, Caroline staggering on stage. If my lack of sympathy for Taillebois and Erbland was a lack in me, then so be it.

For the first time since Deborah had entered the School of American Ballet, and despite the dazzling performances at the Paris Opéra, I found myself respecting Anton Privitera.

When I landed at Kennedy, at almost midnight, there was a message from the electronic gate keeper, "Call this number immediately. Urgent and crucial." I didn't recognize the number.

Deborah. An accident. I raced to the nearest public phone. But it wasn't a hospital; it was an attorney's office.

"Ms. Susan Matthews? Hold, please."

A man's face came on the screen. "This is James Beecher, Ms. Matthews. I'm attorney for Pers Anders. He's being held without bail, pending trial. He left a message for you, most urgent. The message is—"

"Trial? On what charges?" But I think I already knew. The well-cut suit on the lawyer. The move to an expensive neighborhood. Pers was working for somebody, and there weren't very many things he knew how to do.

"The charges are dealing in narcotics. First-degree felony. The message is—"

"Sunshine, right? No, that wouldn't have been expensive enough for Pers," I said bitterly. "Designer viruses? Pleasure center beanos?"

"The message is, 'Don't look in the caverns of the moon.' That's all." The screen went blank.

I stared at it anyway. When Deborah was tiny, in the brief period a million years ago when Pers and I were still together and raising her, she had a game she loved. She'd hide a favorite toy somewhere and call out, 'Don't look in the closet! Don't look under the bed! Don't look in the sock drawer!" The toy was always wherever she said not to look. The caverns of the moon was what she called her bedroom, but that was much later, long after Pers had deserted us both but before she tracked him down in New York. I didn't know that he even knew about it.

Don't look in the caverns of the moon.

I took a helo right to the Central Park landing stage, charging it to the magazine. The last five blocks I ran, past the automated stores that never sleep and the night people who had just gotten up. Deborah wasn't home; she didn't expect me back from Paris until tomorrow. I tore apart her bedroom, and in an old dance bag I found it, flattened between the mattress and box spring. No practiced criminal, my Deborah.

The powder was pinkish, with no particular odor. There was a lot of

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it. I had no idea what it was; probably it had a unique name to go with a unique formula matched to some brain function. What kind of father would use his own daughter as a courier for this designer-gene abyss? Would the cops have already been here if I'd come home a day later? An hour later?

I flushed it all down the toilet, including the dance bag, which I first cut into tiny pieces. Then I searched the rest of the apartment, and then I searched it again. There were no more drugs. There was no money.

She wasn't running stuff for Pers for free. Not Deborah. She had spent the money somewhere.

"They asked me to join the company! He said it was very nice! He said I was much improved!"

I made myself sit and think. It was one o'clock in the morning. Lincoln Center would be locked and dark. She might be at a restaurant with other dancers; she might be staying the night with a friend. I called other SAB students. Each answered sleepily. Deborah wasn't there. Ninette told me that after the evening performance Deborah had said she was going home.

"Well, yes, Ms. Matthews, she did seem a little tense," Ninette said, stifling a yawn, her long hair tousled on the shoulders of her nightgown. "But it was only her second night in actual performance, so I thought . . . " The young voice trailed off. I wasn't going to be told whatever this girl thought. Clearly I was an interfering mother.

You bet I was.

I waited another hour. Deborah didn't come home. I called a cab and went to Caroline Olson's apartment on Central Park South.

It had to be Caroline. She must have known she herself was bioenhanced, and I had seen her dance before her downfall: the complete abandon to ballet, the joy. Maybe she thought that helping other dancers to illegal bioenhancement was a favor to them, a benefit. She might be making a distinction—the same one Dr. Erbland had made—between the ultimately destructive re-engineering done to her *in vitro* and the bioenhancements done to European dancers. Or maybe she didn't connect her own sudden deterioration with how her mother had genetically consecrated her to ballet.

Or maybe she did. Maybe she knew that her meteoric success was what was now killing her. Maybe she was so sick and so enraged that she *wanted* to destroy other dancers along with her. If she couldn't dance out her full career, then neither would they.

Or maybe she thought it was worth it. A short life but a brilliant one. Anything for art. Most dancers ended up crippling their bodies anyway, although more slowly. The great Suzanne Farrell had ended up with a plastic hip, her pelvis destroyed by constant turnout. Mikhail Baryshnikov ruined his knees. Miranda Mains was unable to walk by the time she was 28. Maybe Caroline Olson thought no sacrifice was too great for ballet, even a life.

But not my Deborah's.

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I buzzed the security system of Caroline's apartment for five solid minutes. There was no answer. Finally the system said politely, "Your party does not answer. Further buzzing may constitute legal harassment. You should leave now."

I got back in the cab, chewing on my thumb. I felt that kind of desperation you think you can't live through; it consumes your belly, chokes your breath. The driver waited indifferently. *Where?* God, in New York they could be anywhere.

Anywhere nobody would think to look for illegal medical operations. Anywhere safe, and protected, and easily accessible by dancers, without suspicion.

I gave the driver Anna Olson's address, remembered from the tax return pirated by the Robin Hood. Then I transferred the gun from my purse to my pocket.

I think I wasn't quite sane.

9:

Caroline and I ride in a taxi. I like taxis. I put my head out the window. The taxi has many smells. We stop at Deborah's house. Caroline and I go get Deborah.

"I've changed my mind," Deborah says. Her door is open only a little. She stands behind the door. "I'm not going."

"Yes, you are," Caroline says.

Deborah says, "You're not my mother!"

Caroline changes her smell. She has a cane to walk. She leans on her cane. Her voice gets soft. "No, I'm not your mother. And I'm not going to push you like a mother. Believe me, Deborah, I know what that's like. But as a senior dancer, I'm going to ask you to come with me. I'm willing to beg you to come. It's that important. Not just to you, but to me."

Deborah looks at the floor.

"Don't be embarrassed. Just understand that I mean it. I'll beg, I'll grovel. But first I'm asking, as a senior member of the company."

Deborah looks up. She smells angry. "Why do you care? It's *my* life!"

"Yes. Yours and Privitera's." Caroline closes her eyes. "You owe him something, too. No, don't consider that. Just come because I'm asking you."

Deborah still smells angry. But she comes.

We ride in the taxi to Caroline's mother's house. I say, "Is there a party tonight?"

Deborah laughs. It sounds funny. Caroline says, "Yes, Angel. Another party. With music and dancers and talking. And you can have some pretzels."

"I like pretzels," I say. "Does Deborah like pretzels?"

"No," Deborah says, and now she smells scared.

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We go in the back way. Caroline has a key. People come to the basement. Someone starts music. "Not so loud!" a man says.

"No, it's all right," Caroline says. "My mother's still in Europe and the staff is on vacation while she's gone. We have the place to ourselves."

A woman brings me a pretzel. People talk. Caroline and Deborah and two men talk in the corner. I don't hear the words. The words at parties are very hard. I watch Caroline, and eat pretzels, and watch two people dance to the radio.

"Christ," the man dancer says, "is this fake revelry really necessary?"

"Yes," the woman says. She looks at me. "Caroline says yes."

In the corner, two men show Deborah some papers. Caroline sits with them. Deborah starts to cry.

I watch Caroline. Deborah may touch Caroline. The two men may touch Caroline. But Caroline says parties are happy. No people smell happy. I do not understand.

The buzzer rings.

Nobody moves. People look at each other. Caroline says, "Is the gate still open? Let it go. It's probably kids. There's nobody home but us."

The buzzer rings and rings. Then it stops. Caroline talks to Deborah. The door opens at the top of the stairs.

A man with Caroline takes a bottle from his pockets very fast. He puts the papers on the floor and pours the bottle on it. The papers disappear. "All right, everybody, this is a party," he says.

Steps run down the stairs. A voice calls, "Wait! You can't go down there! Young woman! You can't go down there!" The voice is angry. It is Caroline's mother.

I walk to Caroline. She smells surprised.

A woman comes into the basement. She holds a gun. My ears raise. I stand next to Caroline.

"Nobody move," the woman says. Deborah says, "Mom!"

Caroline looks at the woman, then at Deborah, then at the woman. She walks with her cane to the woman.

"Stay right there," the woman says. She smells angry and scared. I move with Caroline.

"Christ, you sound like a bad holovid," Caroline says. "You're Deborah's mother? What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

From the top of the stairs Caroline's mother calls, "Caroline! What is the meaning of this?"

The woman says very fast, "Deborah, you're making a terrible mistake. Bioenhancement may help your dancing for a while, but it could also kill you. The conference on genetics in Paris—they presented scientific proof that one kind of bioenhancement kills, and if they're just finding that out now about enhancements done twenty-five years ago—then who knows what kind of insane risk you're running with these other kinds? Don't take my word for it, it's on-line this morning. Pers was arrested, damn him, and I found your drug stash just before the police did. That's

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how you're paying for this, isn't it? Debbie—how could you be such a damn *fool?*"

"Wait a minute," Caroline says. She leans on her cane. "You thought we brought Deborah here *to bioenhance her?*" Caroline starts to laugh. She puts her hand on her face. "Oh my God!"

Caroline's mother calls from the top of the stairs, "I'm phoning the police."

Caroline says, very fast, "Go bring her down here, James. You'll have to lift her out of her chair and carry her. Keith, get her chair." The two men run up the stairs.

Caroline is shaking. I stand beside her. I growl. The woman still has the gun. She points the gun at Caroline. I wait for Caroline to tell me *Attack.*

The woman says, "Don't try to deny it. You'd do anything for ballet, wouldn't you? All of you. You're *sick*—but you're not murdering my daughter!"

Caroline's face changes. Her smell changes. I feel her hand on my head. Her hand shakes. Her body shakes. I smell anger bigger than other angers. I wait for *Attack.*

Deborah says, "You're all wrong, Mom! Just like you always are! Does this look like a bioenhancement lab? *Does it?* These people aren't enhancing me—they're trying to talk me *out* of it! These two guys are doctors and they're trying to 'deprogram' me—just like *you* tried to program me all my life! You never wanted me to dance, you always tried to make me into this cute little college-bound student that *you* needed me to be. Never what *I* needed!"

The men carry Caroline's mother and Caroline's mother's chair down the steps. They put Caroline's mother in the chair. Caroline's mother also smells angry. But Caroline smells more angry than anybody.

Caroline says, "Sound familiar, Mother dear? What Deborah's saying? What did *you* learn at the genetic conference? What I've been telling you for months, right? Your gift to dance is dying. Because you wanted a prima ballerina at *any* price. Even if *I'm* the one to pay it."

Caroline's mother says, "You love dance. You wanted it as much as I did. You were a star."

"I never got to find out if I would have been one anyway! That isn't so inconceivable, is it? And then I might have still been dancing! But instead I was . . . *made.* Molded, sewed, carpentered. Into what *you* needed me to be!"

Deborah's mother lowers her gun. Her eyes are big. Caroline's mother says, "You were a star. You had a good run. Without me, you might have been *nothing.* Worthless."

A man says, very soft, "Jesus H. Christ."

Caroline is shaking hard. I am afraid she will fall again. Her hand is on her cane. The cane shakes. Her other hand is on me.

Caroline says, "You cold, self-centered-bitch—"

A little girl runs down the stairs.

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The little girl says, "Tante Anna! Tante Anna! Où êtes-vous?" She stops at the bottom of the steps. She smells afraid. "Qui sont tout ces gens?"

Caroline looks at the little girl. The little girl has no shoes. She has long black fur on her head. Her hind feet go out like Caroline's feet when Caroline dances. The toes look strange. I don't understand the little girl's feet.

Caroline says again, "You cold, self-centered bitch." Her voice is soft now. She stops shaking. "When did you have her made? Five years ago? Six? A new model with improved features? Who will decay all the sooner?"

Caroline's mother says, "You are a hysterical fool."

Caroline says, "Angel—*attack!* Now!"

I attack Caroline's mother. I knock over the chair. I bite her foreleg. Someone screams, "Caroline! For God's sake! Caroline!" I bite Caroline's mother's head. I must protect Caroline. This person hurts Caroline. I must protect Caroline.

A gun fires and I hurt and hurt and hurt—

I love Caroline.

10.

The town of Saratoga, where the American Ballet Theater is dancing its summer season, is itself a brightly colored stage. Visitors throng the racetrack, the brand-new Electronics Museum, the historical battle sites. In 1777, right here, Benedict Arnold and his half-trained revolutionaries stopped British forces under General John Burgoyne. It was the first great victory of freedom over the old order.

Until this year, the New York City Ballet danced here every summer. But the Performing Arts Center chose not to renew the City Ballet contract. In New York, too, City Ballet attendance is half of what it was only a few years ago.

The Saratoga pavilion is open to the countryside. Ballet lovers fill the seats, spread blankets up the sloping lawn, watch dancers accompanied not only by Tchaikovsky or Chopin but also by crickets and robins. In Saratoga, the ballet smells of freshly mown grass. The classic "white ballets"—*Swan Lake, Les Sylphides*—are remembered green. Small girls whose first taste of dance is at Saratoga will dream, for the rest of their lives, of toe shoes skimming over wildflowers.

I take my seat, in the back of the regular seating, as the small orchestra finishes tuning up. The conductor enters to the usual thunderous applause, even though nobody here knows his name and very few care. They have come to see the dancers.

Debussy floats out over the countryside. *Afternoon of a Faun*: slow, melting. On the nearly bare stage, furnished only with barre and mirrors,

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a male dancer in practice clothes wakes up, stretches, warms up his muscles in a series of slow, langorous moves.

A girl appears in the mirror, which isn't really a mirror but an empty place in the backdrop. A void. She, too, stretches, poses, *pliés*. Both dancers watch the mirrors. They are so absorbed in their own reflections that they only gradually become aware of each other's presence. Even then, they exist for each other only as foils, presences to dance to. In the end the girl will step back through the mirror. There is the feeling that for the boy, she may not really have existed at all, except as a dream.

It is Deborah's first lead in a one-act ballet. Her extension is high, her turn out perfect, her movements sure and strong and sustained, filled with the joy of dancing. I can barely stand to look at her. This is her reward, her grail, for continuing her bioenhancement. She isn't dancing for Anton Privitera, but she is dancing. A year and a half of bioenhancement, bought legally now in Copenhagen and paid for by selling her story to an eager press, has given her the physical possibilities to match her musicality, and her rhythm, and her drive.

The faun finally touches the girl, turning her slowly *en attitude*. Deborah smiles. This is her afternoon. She's willing to pay whatever price the night demands, even though science has no idea yet what, for her kind of treatments, it might be.

Privitera must have known that some of his dancers were bioenhanced. The completely inadequate bioscans at City Ballet, the phenomenally low injury rate of his prima ballerina—Privitera *must* have known. Or maybe his staff let him remain in official ignorance, keeping from him any knowledge of heresy in the ranks. There was a rumor that Privitera's business manager, John Cole, even tried to keep Caroline from "deprogramming" dancers who wanted bioenhancement. The rumor about Cole was never substantiated. But in the last year, City Ballet has been struggling to survive. Too many patrons have withdrawn their favor. The mystique of natural art, like other mystiques, didn't last forever. It had a good run.

"If you could have chosen, and that was the *only* way you could have had the career, would you have chosen the embryonic engineering anyway?" was the sole thing Deborah asked Caroline in jail, through bulletproof plastic glass and electronic speaking systems, under the hard eyes of matrons. Caroline, awaiting trial for second-degree murder, didn't seem to mind Deborah's brusqueness, her self-absorption. Caroline was silent a long time, her gaunt face lengthened from the girlish roundness I remembered. Then she said to Deborah, "No."

"*I* would," Deborah said.

Caroline only looked at her.

They're here, Caroline and her dog. Somewhere up on the grass, Caroline in a powerchair, Angel hobbling on the three legs my bullet left him. Caroline was acquitted by reason of temporary insanity. They didn't let Angel stay with her during the trial. Nor did they let him testify, which would have been abnormal but not impossible. Five-year-olds can testify

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under some circumstances, and Angel has the biochip-and-reengineered intelligence of a five-year-old. Maybe it wouldn't have been so abnormal. Or maybe all of us, not just Anton Privitera, will have to change our definition of abnormal.

Five-year-olds know a lot. It was Marguerite who cried out, "Vous avez assassiné ma tante Anna!" She knew whom I was aiming at, even if the police did not. But Marguerite couldn't know how much I loathed the old woman who had made her daughter into what her mother needed her to be—just as I, out of love, had tried to do to mine.

On stage, Deborah *pirouettes*. Maybe her types of bioenhancement will be all right, despite the growing body of doubts collected by Caroline's doctor allies. When the first cures for cancer were developed from reengineered retroviruses, dying and desperate patients demanded they be administered without long, drawn-out FDA testing. Some of those patients died even sooner, possibly from the cures. Some lived to be ninety. The edge of anything is a lottery, and protection doesn't help—not against change, or madmen, or errors of judgment. *I protect Caroline*, Angel kept saying after I shot him, yelping in pain between sentences. *I protect Caroline.*

Deborah flows into a *retiré*, one leg bent at the knee, and rises *on point*. Her face glows. Her partner lifts her above his head and turns her slowly, her feet perfectly arched in their toe shoes, dancing on air. ●

AND THE SEA GIVE UP ITS DEAD

Stink's thick as fog a hundred miles inland
unless there's mountains in the way.
People call it Lucky Kentucky now, and PA,
where the steelfire stench used to clog your lungs,
is clear as Kansas, past the Appalachians.
Nobody lives in Jersey any more, or Maryland
or Florida, either coast.
From Maine to Matamorros, you can smell
where the food chain used to be.
Ever since the plankton bellied up,
the high tide line's a waist-high pile of fish
rotting in the sun.
Even the gulls can't stomach it; the stench
sends them soaring inland
where the spring defrosts
winter bodies for them
in the parking lots of malls.

—William John Watkins

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ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

APOCALYPSE HOW

Why Do Birds, Damon Knight, Tor, $18.95
The Harvest, Robert Charles Wilson, Bantam/Spectra, $22.50/ $11.00
Assemblers Of Infinity, Kevin J. Anderson & Doug Beason Bantam/ Spectra, $4.99
Kalifornia, Marc Laidlaw, St. Martin's, $18.95

It has become something of a truism that the approach of the year 2000 is going to trigger an outbreak of, well, millenarianism —nut cults informed, if that is the word, by the belief that, one way or another, the turn of the millennium is going to bring on the Apocalypse, the End of Things As We Know Them.

Birds of ill omen who relish a flagellatory comeuppance for this uppity bunch of monkeys look forward to a Day of Reckoning, be it the collapse of the biosphere, the spiritual heat death of the universe, or better yet, the terminal closure of the whole production by a God of Wrath. Those of a more transcendental nature await the Rapture, the Arrival of the Mother Ship, the Cosmic Connection, the advent of 200 channels of interstellar MTV, the Virtual Reality of virtually everything.

Numerology? Maybe. A self-fulfilling prophecy? Better believe it! Our fates may not be ciphered in the stars, but certain star numbers do have the power to summon up spirits from the trashy deeps.

A porn publisher not exactly noted for his mediawise wisdom scored big one year with a line of stiffeners featuring appropriately annuated titles and couldn't figure out why the same packaging dropped dead the year after. Why didn't *Orality '70* sell like *Orality '69?*

The turn of the Year 1000 flushed its fair share of cults and nuts out of the woodwork even without the benefit of satellite television, high speed printing presses, or the *National Inquirer,* so it's pretty safe to predict that the Year 2000 is going to be one hell of an excuse for a media New Year's party to end all New Year's parties, at least for the next thousand years. We're all fated to an overload of media coverage and punditory pontificating on the Turn of the Millennium long before the advent itself finally arrives.

Science fiction has long since begun to mine this cultural mother lode, and we have already seen quite a few works, comic and other-

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wise, centered about the millenarianism to come at the end of the decade we have already entered.

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, the retribalization of Eastern Europe, skinheads in the streets of Germany, economic malaise throughout the world, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, mass starvation in Africa, AIDS, holes in the ozone, tailored genes, hip hop, Ross Perot, it only takes a wee bit of paranoia to make the case that the return of Elvis in a flying saucer from Lemuria is at hand.

It may take a powerful magic number to induce the mass zeitgeist to ponder the End of Life As We Know It with obsessional relish, but SF has always had a taste for apocalyptic termination of monkey business as usual.

Mass millenarianism may make such matters culturally trendy only once every thousand years, but global paradigm shifts, technological and ecological apocalypses, the replacement or transcendence of the human species, have always been central to the elusive esthetic core of SF.

Indeed, if one were to adopt a millenarian attitude oneself, one could make a pretty good science fictional case that the rise in the popularity of science fiction imagery that began in the early 1970s, *Star Trek, Star Wars,* the SF publishing boom, the rise of the Science Fiction Publishing Industry, is itself all a vast plot by mediawise superior aliens to prepare us for their awesome advent at the turn of the millennium on MTV.

You see what I mean?

Certain psychocritics have deemed science fiction a paranoid literature, and from their limited technical definition of paranoia, perhaps it is, for science fiction, inevitably, is going to be deeply involved with what they would call delusions of reference.

The paranoid sees references to himself in everything, he gets death threats from the pattern of cracks in the ceiling, or spirit messages from Jimi Hendrix in the 60 cycle hum in the walls. The paranoid always lives in interesting times. The science fiction reader, of course, can be virtually defined as someone who *would like* to live in interesting times, at least for the duration of the tale.

At first glance, one might be tempted to say this applies to all readers of fiction, since few people pick up a novel or a story in search of boredom. But deeper consideration reveals otherwise.

True, readers of other genres also seek out interesting stories, bizarre events, outré characters, but, except for devotees of certain cognate forms such as Magic Realism or Surrealism, these are generally set against a space-time matrix that offers stability and reassurance. Much historical fiction does deal with apocalyptic transformations, moments of cultural phase change, but by the genre's very nature, these are interesting times safely set in the invariant historical past, not cataclysms which the readers can in one way or another fantasize as crossing their own timelines.

Science fiction readers, however, no less than science fiction writers, would like nothing better than to live in science fiction times. Who among us would refuse a flying

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saucer ride or a jaunt to the twenty-fifty century? Which of us would not secretly relish, in some perverse manner, witnessing astrophysical events on a scale which did the dinosaurs in? The landing of a flying saucer on the White House lawn? The evolution of the human species into Something Other? The End of Life As We Know It and the beginning of Something Else?

Even if reading about it makes us feel queasy. Even when it confronts us with the concept of a species mortality whose contemplation does little to make us feel better about our own.

The paranoid's delusions of reference are usually caused by a biochemical imbalance in the physical matrix of the consciousness in question, like being on too much speed. One's senses are indeed sharpened, one's world is indeed drenched in meaning whose every minute detail is of transcendental importance to oneself, but it's all a plot by the Mutant Insect Bats from the Planet Sade to get you.

SF's literary delusions of reference are, on the other hand, deliberately crafted creations, hopefully designed to produce more balanced effects than those of an overdose of methedrene or a bang on the head with a mallet.

Not that you always whistle a happy tune coming out of the theater. Not that much of this stuff isn't designed to make you feel uncomfortable. Or even make you feel weirder for having read it.

Damon Knight's *Why Do Birds* kind of made me feel weirder for having read it. And it was no doubt meticulously crafted to do so.

There's something really twisted about this novel, but something so elusive it's hard to get a handle on, like the title. What the hell does it mean? What does it refer to? Which old pop song does it set to running in your head? You can almost get it, but never quite. I think Damon Knight intended the title to have just that effect. I think the whole novel was written to produce a complex of such effects.

Why Do Birds is certainly an unequivocal example of the science fiction apocalypse, even though it is set beyond the turn of the millennium. A man named Ed Stone appears in the twenty-first century, claiming to have been kidnapped by aliens in the 1930s, held in suspended animation ever since, and now sent forth to convince the peoples and governments of the Earth to build an enormous mausoleum one cubic mile in volume. The entire population of the Earth is then to stack itself in suspended animation inside in an orderly manner so that the aliens may bear the Cube away to a paradisical new world when the Earth is destroyed by an impending nonspecific catastrophe.

Well, you might suppose that Stone would have a lot of trouble escaping from the funny farm, let alone persuading the entire human race to close down its terrestrial civilization and crawl like good trusting creatures into what may be an escape capsule from extinction or may be an alien fumigator's advanced version of a roach motel, to be conveniently flushed when filled.

You might think just telling people his story would not go very far

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in convincing them that such lunacy is true. But you'd be wrong.

Ed Stone succeeds in pushing the whole project through to completion from beginning to end doing just that. The aliens have given him a ring that makes anyone he shakes hands with believe him at once, completely, without question, and without even questioning *why* they believe such prima facie preposterous bullshit.

You might think that any novel with such a central premise would have to be a farce. You'd be wrong again.

Damon Knight, like his aliens, gifts his character with one arbitrary power and sets him down out of suspended animation in a realistically rendered near future world to see what will happen. *Why Do Birds* certainly has its funny moments, but it is far from farce.

Instead, the single farcical element in an otherwise realistically rendered novel—Stone's nutcase story and his power to make everyone else believe it utterly—becomes something sinister, something unsettling on deep levels, a literarily black magical something whose formal set-up itself is somehow elusively disturbing.

Stepwise, Stone works his way into contact with the leaders of the world, recruits them into the great terminal enterprise. A corporate structure is set up. The Cube is designed and the technical problems are solved. A temporal-shift suspended animation technique is developed, the nature of which means that the people who enter the Cube will be perfectly preserved but human science sees no way of getting them out. No doubt the aliens do.

Stepwise, Damon Knight lays out the details of shutting down a planetary civilization while stuffing its billions of inhabitants into a mile high cube at a rate that will fill it by a fixed deadline in a manner that John W. Campbell would have found exemplary. The logistics, the engineering, the financing, just as if he was Delos D. Harriman selling the Moon.

Except what he is selling is either total dementia out of the back pages of tabloids newspaper or faith in the moral purity of theoretical aliens or species suicide or somehow all three.

No one seems to see this for more than a few minutes at a time. No one seems to perceive that the enterprise to which human civilization has surrendered its treasure and its destiny is other than obviously rational.

Well, some people do. Some people think it's kind of, you know, crazy, self-destructive even, but Knight gives most of them black hats as greedy plutocrats or thuggish politicians. Other people refuse to enter the Cube, some simply unwilling to leave the Earth, others not quite willing to buy a used Mother Ship from Ed Stone.

It would be unfair to reveal the apocalyptic climax, even if it were possible, which, well, it sort of isn't.

Damon Knight has never been a prolific novelist. He has not written a five foot shelf of short stories either, but down through a long career he has produced quite a few masterpieces, carefully and consciously crafted stories whose effects are often achieved via formal

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subtleties. In addition, he is a famous critic and workshop organizer, whose critical focus has often been on the technical ins and outs of how desired effects may be achieved or how you may have screwed them up.

Meaning that Damon Knight is a technically conscious craftsman with a keen sense of how formal structure can be used to emotional and esthetic effect, so I think it's fair to surmise that *he* knew just what he was doing in *Why Do Birds* even if *I* can't quite put my finger on it.

I don't think I'm supposed to. I don't think I really mind.

I've said that *Why Do Birds* is the kind of thing that makes you feel weirder for having read it. So if you don't like being disturbed in this manner, maybe you shouldn't. For one thing that Knight has certainly achieved here is the evocation of the *alien*.

We never see the aliens, nobody does, and on the fact of it, on the reality-level of the believable world that Knight's set up, no one should believe in them for ten seconds. But everyone acts as if they do, or cannot help it, or whatever, even while they are questioning it, sort of, although they appear otherwise sane.

That's what's so alien about it. People are behaving in an entirely rational manner in the process of doing something one perceives as completely crazy. Knight does *not* explain it all neatly in the end, which is not to say that his closure is not formally or emotionally satisfying. The nature of what it satisfies, though, is a bit harder to define.

It's one thing to write Lovecraftian descriptions of tentacled goo or have the world devoured by sapient lizards who live on pain, but it's quite another to somehow manage to evoke pure alien presence itself with no specifics at all via the intrusion of its effects in an otherwise more or less psychologically familiar world.

That's what Damon Knight has somehow managed to do here, and his closure is so satisfyingly disturbing or disturbingly satisfying precisely because he refrains to the end from lifting the spell.

In *The Harvest,* curiously enough, Robert Charles Wilson has taken what is in some respects a similar premise and done something entirely different with it.

Here the aliens do arrive up front in a great big mother of a Mother Ship, a mighty globe that orbits the Earth to become a second moon in the night sky. The alien Artifact remains as impenetrable and uncommunicative as Kubrick's Monolith for years, long enough to move off the front pages, and then, all at once, everyone on Earth is given a kind of mystic dream and a choice.

The Travelers more or less introduce themselves as an old and advanced species, or collection of species, or hive of species, whatever, who have transcended, in a manner of speaking, both death and the material realm, having attained a discorporate immortality as patterns of energy in the infinite virtual realities contained within the universe of their Artifact.

They have become gods of their own creations or the ultimate hackerly wankers haunting their

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own game consoles, depending on your point of view.

The choice offered individually to all humans is whether to surrender their fleshly humanity for this discorporate alien immortality or to refuse in one's heart and be left behind in the material world of death and Maya.

Everyone is offered the choice in that magical hour. Most people, not surprisingly, prefer immortality to death, and the End of Life As We Know It is at hand, as the world and its population transform themselves into the Other.

We never really see these aliens either, only their artifacts and effects. We are told about what they are and what their motivations purport to be via the recounting of various characters' versions of the collective vision, but that vision, after all, was an alien intrusion itself, not guaranteed to be reliably truthful.

And Wilson has chosen to tell his story primarily through the viewpoints of the small minority of people who said no to the alien offer, those who for whatever reason and on whatever level decided that their own concept of their own humanity was too high a price to pay to escape their mortality.

Further, at least for something like 60 percent of the novel, Wilson focuses down on the small town of Buchanan, Oregon, on those therein who have chosen humanity over immortality.

Focusing down on a small group in a familiar setting on the periphery of apocalyptic world-changing events is a time-honored science fictional gambit, successfully employed in everything from John Christopher's *Day of the Triffids* to one of the central literary strategies of the best-selling novelist in the history of the universe, Stephen King.

King could certainly afford to live virtually any lifestyle anywhere in the world, a planet upon which he has traveled widely enough to have done an American Express commercial, so it seems safe to assume that he lives in his familiar home town, Bangor, Maine, out of choice, not ignorance or economic necessity.

He sets the bulk of his fiction in Maine. He focuses down on small groups in familiar settings he knows and probably loves well, out there on the edges of things rather than in the red heat of the metropolitan centers.

In the science fiction genre, this has been a typically British strategy, focusing such gigantic events as the arrival of the Triffids or the terminal crystallization of everything through the lens of its impact on a small and relatively non-central community.

King Americanizes the strategy for his own horrific purposes by making the time relentlessly and believably now, the place somewhere he knows inside out, and the characters not the literary clichés or types other fiction has led you to expect in such environs, but real locals in a real contemporary America, where even the smallest town in the deepest backwoods of Maine is sat-linked into the collective zeitgeist of downtown everywhere. That's why a boy from the boonies can be the best-selling author in a demographically urban country top-heavy with wannabe

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city slickers. His fiction plucks such a true chord because it is informed by the entirely post-modern knowledge that in this electronically mediated age *the boonies no longer exist.*

King uses the small town strategy to heighten the emotional reality of his horrific occurrences by inflicting them on vividly and subtly real people, the object being to create emotionally complex terror.

In *The Harvest,* Robert Charles Wilson, a Canadian, or at least a Canadian resident, seems closer to the Brits in his uses of the small town setting and cast than to King.

Like the British disaster school, he uses the small town setting and cast of characters to make his world-shattering enormities descriptively manageable in shades other than deep purple, no mean task when you are conveying the transformation of our multiplex planetary civilization into the Other. Restriction of camera angle makes the frame seem fuller. Suggestion of impinging enormities out there beyond the communal campfire conveys their emotional realities better than pages of floridly detailed description.

Wilson needs this restriction, this narrowing of focus, because his thematic questions are maximally enormous. What makes us human? Is it more important to us than life immortal? Does consciousness, or even (gulp!) the soul, require a material matrix?

Played with the organ stops out as wide-screen world-wrecking melodrama, such thematic vastness can lose all connection to quotidian reality. Focusing it all through a slice of small-town life lenses it down into emotionally credible fine focus.

On the other hand, Wilson might have had an easier time of it if he had used the technique a bit more like Stephen King. This is an ambitious novel, on the whole a successful one, but not without a struggle. Focusing in on a small community to convey such vasty deeps through the restrictive illusion in the British manner allows Wilson to keep his characters emotionally real in a reality in the act of apocalyptic transformation.

But by choosing to concentrate so heavily, and for about the first half of the book almost exclusively, on the viewpoints and emotions of the small minority of humans who have *rejected* alien immortality, he seems to be avoiding the real story, namely the story of the vast majority of those who chose transhuman transcendence.

Not because what happens to the masses is more interesting or more politically correct than what happens to a small minority, but because the minority viewpoint here is that of a cast of viewpoint characters whose commonality consists in having been bypassed by the central event of the story.

Okay, it's scary stuff for Dr. Wheeler to watch his daughter turn into a cell of the evolving transhumanity, but beyond the goosebumps, there's the desire to get on with central object of thematic interest and natural simian curiosity, namely the fate and nature of those billions, that complex of civilizations, those people just like you and me who *embraced* the Apocalypse.

Wouldn't you?

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According to Wilson, almost everybody did.

So naturally enough, most readers are going to identify with them, with those who passed beyond the End of Life As We Know It, rather than with those the zeitgeist left behind.

This has always been the weakness of a certain species of British science fiction—not so much a failure to concentrate on movers and shapers, but a certain reluctance to attempt direct literary confrontation with the consciousness of the transformed, with awesome central events, with questions of cosmic import, with the End of Life As We Know It, with the naked countenance of the Other. And one of Stephen King's central strengths is that he generally does *not* use the small town strategy to avoid it.

For sure, prudent craftsman's wisdom may eschew such risky heroism when the writing task at hand is so problematic of successful achievement and the penalty of failure is likely to be a Cosmic Comic pratfall of overwritten blather.

But in the story Robert Charles Wilson set out to tell, it is not a confrontation that can really be avoided without making the reader feel cheated.

After all, the question of the moral, spiritual, scientific, and psychological nature of the majority of humans who sold their flesh and their planet for transmaterial immortality is the core of *The Harvest.* It's all very well to limn in the outlines of these transhuman entities from the outside, but the novel would be an unsatisfying one-sided dialectic between naysaying small town curmudgeon viewpoint characters and psychically unreal loved ones turned Other unless it took you inside the consciousness of the Others in question.

Wilson takes a long time getting to it, a good deal too much of a metaphysical striptease before we begin to connect emotionally with those who chose immortality.

But patience, he does finally do it, almost as if he realized the necessity about halfway through. Which is what makes *The Harvest*—despite a beginning that drags a bit with unnecessary action loops far less interesting than the mysteries waiting too long to be revealed, and an annoying concentration on characters of less interest than what's in the wings—a successful novel in the end.

He does pull it off. The resolution, though sogged a bit by a somewhat sentimental escape clause from the central moral dilemma for those who chose humanity and death, succeeds in leaving the reader with a final effect that creates and maintains a satisfying ambiguity about the moral and metaphysical nature of his apocalyptic transformation.

The Harvest is neither horror nor hard science fiction, but peculiarly enough, since we do not usually associate horrific ends with hard science fiction means, *Assemblers of Infinity* by Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason is both.

But upon reflection, we remember that there is indeed a tradition of "hard science fiction horror novels" and an esthetic and formal framework for the form, too.

You restrict yourself to the sci-

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entifically possible, to the technologically plausible—indeed, making it seem as technologically *inevitable* as possible is part of the game—and you dream up a really neat and nasty way of destroying Things As We Know Them.

However you wish to define it: the human race, the terrestrial biosphere, the planet itself.

Anderson and Beason have chosen nanotechnology as the agent of terminal transformation.

Nanotech is becoming quite trendy in certain circles, and while it's far too early to talk of Nanopunks or Nanonerds, it wouldn't surprise me if nanotech turns out to be the next technological impetus for a literary movement within SF, as space travel was for the Golden Age, the Atomic Bomb for the Fifties Generation, psychedelic drugs and electrified guitars for the New Wave, the computer and Virtual Reality for the Cyberpunks.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that nanotech is at present a technology that does not exist. At the moment, it is not much more than a gleam in the literary eye of K. Eric Drexler, a conceptual notion.

The concept is the creation of mini-robots of molecular size or smaller, a self-replicating swarm of itsy bitsy nanocritters (as Anderson and Beason call them), programmed by even more itsy bitsy computers inside to reproduce themselves exponentially, to manipulate matter as far down, perhaps, as the atomic level, to heal the sick, perhaps raise the dead, manufacture anything at all from elemental raw material. . . .

You can see how nice it would be to have a few tailored starter cultures on the shelves. One can of nanocritters turns a pile of rocks into a half-scale version of Windsor Castle, another turns asteroids into space colonies, another magically transforms a great pile of shit into an annual production of Shinola just to make the point.

How do you make the nanocritters? How do you program them?

Well, yes, there *are* a few piddling little technical details to work out. . . .

But, hey, that's not our job, we're science fiction writers, and at present, at least, nanotechnology is a *science fiction* technology. A literary present for us from the cutting-edge scientific community, with whom we have long had a peculiar working collaboration.

We borrow the merest theoretical twinkle in their eye and turn it into fiction without having to bother with how, and thereby in turn tend to cause it to arise in the real world by oftimes culturally devious means.

They say we are mad but we are not mad.

Space travel was such a science fiction technology for decades before Yuri Gagarin and Project Apollo. Virtual Reality entrepreneurs are only now in the process of creating Cyberspace. By imagining the results of present theory become future artifact, such science fiction technology tends to cause itself to be called into being in the real world by inspiring scientists and entrepreneurs alike with visions of the possibilities. Sometimes even by bringing the two together.

The payback can come in liter-

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ary dividends. Where would we SF writers have been without our literary spaceships? Stuck on a boondock planet in an otherwise uninhabited backwoods solar system way out on a spiral arm!

Space travel as a literary device opened up the universe, or the galaxy, or at least the solar system, depending on how sleazy you were willing to get.

The consensus creation variously known as the web or the net or cyberspace is presently actualized in software and hardware, and the present quest for true Virtual Reality is a direct attempt to create the missing element that gave the literary version its punch, the illusion, or if you prefer the reality, of being there. What loops around, gets around.

And nanotechnology, presently being goosed toward reality, would seem to have the potential to short out the literary gap between hard science and magic.

Arthur C. Clarke has said that any sufficiently advanced technology would appear to be magic. This is the scientific mystic talking. But from a literary point of view, drape any magic in sufficiently credible scientific clothing, and it will appear to be technology.

Literarily speaking, it means that nanotechnology can be used to evoke the Jungian depths of magic or the slime monsters of the Freudian id and much between in a manner that renders it intellectually credible on a scientific level for people who care about such matters.

Who needs a magic wand when nanotechnology can transform anything into anything?

There is a potential here, therefore, a potential which has already been occasionally realized, perhaps most notably in Greg Bear's *Blood Music,* for reconciling poetic romanticism with hard science fiction. Bear uses runaway nanotechnology to alter reality entire, to actualize, among other things, de Chardin's Noosphere, and to employ a stylistic freedom not generally found in hard SF, a transformational style arising out of the description of a transformational reality.

This is not quite what Anderson and Beason have done in *Assemblers of Infinity.* What they have done instead is ponder some of the implications of nanotechnology more deeply and in greater detail than most have done before, and come up with something of a hard-science horror novel.

In a well-realized, very modestly space-going near future twenty-first century (odd thought but true), with bases on the Moon, but only talk of Mars, an alien artifact is discovered in the process of construction in a lunar crater. That it is arising from the raw regolith as the work of a colony of alien nanocritters is apparent when the discoverers' space suits are disassembled into a molecular goo.

Anderson and Beason assume an Einsteinian universe, a rigorous hard SF practice. In such a universe, with a light-speed limit and an iron law of mass-energy ratios, the best way for an advanced civilization to propagate would be to shotgun out a lot of teeny-tiny low mass particles at high relativistic speeds, each one a kind of gene, coding for an entire colony, build-

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ings, machinery, even the colonists. Given nanotech, technological replication of life from inorganic materials is no problem once you secure a supply of all the necessary elements. We're talking of trillions upon trillions of submolecular nanocritters that can take molecules apart and put new ones together atom by atom.

Anderson and Beason thus set up a kind of spacegoing technological thriller a bit in the mode of *The Andromeda Strain,* as teams of scientists on the Moon, in a La Grange Point space habitat, and at an isolated Antarctic nanotech research station, struggle to understand what the hell is going on before the alien artifact is completed, maybe even how to stop it.

Why put an nanotech research facility out in the middle of the Antarctic nowhere?

Precisely to isolate it. Anderson and Beason have pondered the dangers of nanotechnology too, and so has their fictional world scientific bureaucracy. Are nanocritters really critters? Are they alive?

That is a philosophical question which may launch a thousand books, but whether you choose to view them as microrobots or microorganisms, the practical effect is the same—the buggers are hyperinfectious and worse. Much worse. They can manipulate living cells down to an atomic level, dissolve their way through walls. In alchemical terms, voilà, the Ur-Schleim at Large and the Universal Solvent.

What confines a universal solvent?

Well . . . uh . . . there could be technical problems. . . .

The sort of problems that could prove universally terminal. In theory, at least, this stuff can dissolve not only people but whole biospheres, maybe even planets, and muy rapido. So if you're going to play with such critters you better do it away from everywhere in a labful of redundant fail-safe self-destruct systems, so that any that might escape from your crucible can be nuked till they glow blue if necessary.

So while Dr. Jordan Parvu, unwilling to be dragged away from his work into space, plays with the primitive terrestrial version in his Antarctic lab, his assistant, Dr. Erika Trace, is drafted as the next best thing to lead the attempt to deal with the advanced alien version on the Moon.

Well, you know what will happen, at least you think you do. An experiment will go wrong, very wrong indeed, and protoplasmic chaos and worse will threaten to be released as a terminal biospheric nanovirus.

While the alien artifact manifesting itself on the Moon . . .

Well, the plot is satisfyingly complicated, dramatically and scientifically. The character relations are deeper and more subtle than one has been led to expect from this sort of thing. In the end, *Assemblers of Infinity* becomes something more than a well-done hard SF cautionary technological tale of the perils of nanotechnology gone wild. It might be giving away too much to go much further, but I don't think it goes too far to say that what makes *Assemblers of Infinity* something deeper than that is the ambiguity of its closure. Let

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us hope this is the literary wisdom it seems to be rather than a set-up for a sequel.

For my money, anyway, the best feature of this novel, and it has many, is that Anderson and Beason have eschewed the easy strategy of having the whole climax of the novel be the battle to save the planet, won or lost. That *is* the major plot thrust, of course, and the novel *does* deliver an action climax. But the whole novel is structured to make the solving of the mystery of the alien nanocritters and what they are calling into being on the Moon, the revelation of the true nature of the Other, the *thematic* climax.

And Anderson and Beason do deliver what they promise on this level, too, and maybe a little extra. They do more than solve the scientific mystery of the nanocritters from space. They close with answered questions that point to vaguer and vaster ones, maybe the beginning of a clade of whole new notions about what an advanced civilization would really be like, about implications of nanotechnology perhaps presently unsuspected.

On the other hand, for an approach to the Apocalypse that's lighter, brighter, and totally Californian, like a good Napa Valley chablis, there's Marc Laidlaw's *Kalifornia*.

There's really only one literarily important piece of technology here. It's not exactly conceptually original, but in this context it turns out to be more than enough. Everybody, or almost everybody, in Laidlaw's gonzoid future California has their nervous systems wired up to receive umpteen channels of full sensory virtual reality broadcasts.

Yes, as technological extrapolation, it's been done a thousand times before, but what's interesting here is not the hardware but the schlockware. *Kalifornia* being a Californian novel, what can such a profusion of reality programming be but Industry product?

Famous long ago as the stars of the top-rated soap on the wires, the members of the Figueroa Family have gone their separate ways, with only sister Poppy's life still in show business, her ratings slipping, and desperate stunts being written into the scripts.

In return for fame and fortune, wire stars' experiences are recorded and broadcast to the hopefully avid masses as they live out their lives primarily inside schlocky studio scripts.

As I've said, and as the title itself openly proclaims, this *is* a Californian novel. You expected the main characters *not* be in show business?

From a certain perspective, with the lives of the actors themselves following scripts and the audience experiencing the results directly, television becomes indistinguishable from reality, and *everybody* is in show business.

Sandy Figueroa, his entire life spent inside this electronic fishbowl, made his bucks, got out, retired to his plantation in northern California where he grows redweed, a major Californian cash crop genetically engineered from cannabis and redwood stock. But when sister Poppy's baby, born as a ratings-hyping wire event, gets snatched by villains not in the

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script, and Poppy is almost killed, Sandy is dragged back into the mediated monkey business of LA.

Laidlaw's tone and treatment are characteristically Californian too, wired along the media interface like his characters, like the whole crazy state, like the national audience snorting up the stardust it produces as its main product.

Kalifornia is a Californian novel in yet another sense too, the sense alluded to in the orthographic transformation of California to Kali-fornia.

Kali-fornia refers to the main McGuffin, the reason Poppy's baby, born wired, has been snatched—a complicated plot by assorted typical denizens of the Holy City (a kind of free-for-all California cult Beirut in the heart of Los Angeles in more ways than one) to incarnate the Destroyer through wire works as a kind of superbaby-cyborg hive-mind-controlling TV star deity.

As one might expect from even such a short-form plot summary, the various and sundry factions don't even agree on what reality they're in, and everything will go drastically wrong all the time.

Kalifornia is what might be described as a satiric romp through the mediascape of the next century, but its characters have a bit too much depth, and we care for them a bit too seriously to take all this as slapstick. There are moments of real terror. These are moments of real pathos.

The cliché temptation is to proclaim "in the tradition of Philip K. Dick" and there's some truth to it, too. But it also reads a bit like what Alfred Bester might have written right after *The Stars My Destination* if he had decided to tackle the future of Southern California. Or Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland.* Or to stretch a point to make a point, Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.*

The Wolfe is a surreal book-length piece about the adventures of a best-selling author who drops a lot of acid, recruits a tribe of zanies that call themselves the Merry Pranksters and ride around stoned out of their minds in a psychedelic bus turning people onto LSD at mass events, thus creating a social movement that sweeps through California, transforming the consciousness of the nation, while they're all getting crazier and crazier. . . .

Like *Vineland,* like some of Dick, like the Kerouac of *Dharma Bums,* like Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* like a lot of things that don't seem to have much else in common, *Kalifornia* is a California novel.

What makes a California novel a California novel?

Everything that makes *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* a California novel plus the one thing that doesn't. Wolfe describes the state in just the terms of surreal events and crazier than life characters that capturing its spirit requires.

Only thing is, it's a piece of reportage, not a novel. It's just, it's just, well, it's just California.

So Laidlaw's title is perfect, though it might be equally perfect for a whole slew of other books, too, Wolfe's included.

For in a certain sense, California is indeed Kali-fornia.

Isn't the state addicted to the concept of transcendence through

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chaotic destruction? How many of its gurus and preachers annually raise funds by predicting the Apocalypse, or the Rapture, or the return of the Mother Ship, or Momma Gaia's rolling pin upside your head?

California *loves* this stuff. Real Californians aren't terrified by the Apocalypse, they're always waiting for the next one to arrive before the ratings for the last one drop to the bottom of the charts.

Think of it as Darwinian bravado.

With vast summer brush fires and rainy season floods when there isn't a drought, with the whole state sitting astride a fault line which everyone *knows* will sooner or later drop California and all that it implies giggling into the sea, only those who can get off on the contemplation of real life high budget special effects disasters will survive to breed the next generation of mutant ninja mall rats.

On the other hand, my favorite end to the California Apocalypse movie appeared as a poster, popular in the Golden State years ago, which explains what makes it Golden in typical California style.

The Great Quake has come, the San Andreas Fault has given way completely, and California has been cleaved from the North American continent.

But as its denizens gather in the Hollywood Hills to toke up with a six-pack and greet the End of Life As We Know It, behold, it is La-La Land which blithely surfs the crest of the Apocalypse, and everything *east* of California, all that stuff between Mulholland and the Hudson, the so-called real world, which sinks beneath the waves. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The big Memorial Day con(vention) weekend is at our throats. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. When phoning, be polite. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at Cons as Filthy Pierre.

MAY 1993

28-31—**DisClave.** For info, write: **Box 677, Washington DC 20044.** Or phone: **(703) 273-3297** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Chantilly VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Dulles Airport Marriott. Guests will include: Katherine Kurtz, Patricia Davis. Draws over 1000 fans.

28-30—**VCon. (604) 936-4754.** Totem Residence, UBC, Vancouver BC. DeLint, Coney, Rob Alexander.

28-30—**ConQuest. (816) 923-9834.** Park Place Hotel, Kansas City MO. James P. Hogan, Nick Smith.

28-31—**Mexicon.** St. Nicholas Hotel, Scarborough England. Norman Spinrad, Pat Cadigan. Relaxacon.

28-30—**Famous Monsters Con. (201) 759-1008.** Hyatt near DC Nat'l. Airport. Done by FMoF Magazine.

JUNE 1993

4-6—**DeepSouthCon. (504) 769-3766.** Executive Inn East, Louisville KY. Emma Bull, Will Shetterly.

4-6—**DukCon. (708) 665-4099.** Hyatt, Lisle (near Chicago) IL. L. Frankowski, B. Higgins, B. Gehm.

4-6—**Ad Astra. (416) 454-5499.** Sheraton East, Toronto ON. Robin Wood, Dave Duncan. Over 600 fans.

4-7—**New Zealand Nat'l. Con. (04) 556-4543.** Hotel St. George, Wellington NZ. Gerrold, Niven, May.

11-13—**ConamaZoo, Box 762, Kalamazoo MI 49005.** Stouffer Hotel, Battle Creek MI. L. K. Hamilton.

11-13—**MountainTrek, 2116 Belle Terra Rd. #C, Knoxville TN 37923. (615) 690-8595.** Jean Lorrah.

11-13—**ConFuse, Bjorklind, Fanjukaregatan 9, Linkoping S-58246, Sweden. +46 (0) 13 27 44 63.**

18-20—**SF & Fantasy Festival, Box 791089, New Orleans LA 70179. (504) 837-9462.** R. Silverberg.

18-20—**Galaxy Fair, Box 150471, Arlington TX 76015. (817) 467-0681.** Fantasy in Arts & Literature.

18-20—**DiversiCon, Box 8036 Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** Saville Plaza, Bloomington MN.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

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1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430 Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 944-1998 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

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24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Convention. US$85.

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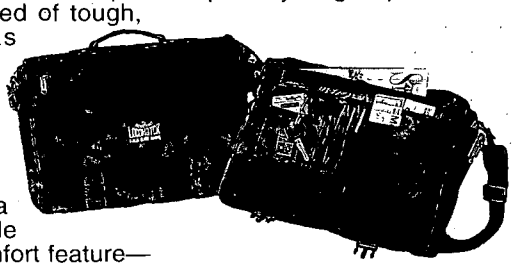
People on the go always have so much to carry around, but the expandable portfolio bag by Locomotor makes it a snap to keep everything in place. This roomy (17"x14") bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant black canvas material and features eleven spacious extra pockets (2 with zippers) and 4 slots for pens. Plus, a unique zipper design enables the bag's main compartment to expand to more than double its normal width—to a full seven inches. Adjustable wide shoulder strap provides a real comfort feature—or carry the bag by the durable handle. This black Locomotor Bag lets you keep it all together whenever you are on the go. #A2057—$26.98 ($5.75).



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